Epilogue

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In 1920, there were 1.19 million workers employed in the British coal industry. My two grandfathers were included in that number. After a hundred years, and cascading through the generations, the scale and impact of mining heritage become clear. In no other capitalist economy was coal mining so dominant or so vital to all aspects of economic and social life (Britain was virtually a single fuel economy until the middle of the 1950s), and nowhere were miners so strongly organised. At that time, the Miners Federation of Great Britain was also by far the largest association of miners in the world.

The large number of miners, the nature of their working conditions and the essential nature of their work created a powerful moral element within British socialist thought which was perhaps best expressed by George Orwell. In 1937, he visited a coalmine in Lancashire and,

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exhausted by the walk to the coalface, he marvelled at the endurance of the miners. Orwell wrote about how the miners' "lamp lit world down there is as necessary to the daylight world above as the root is to the flower" (Orwell, 1986, p. 30). It was an urge to expose the details of this "lamp lit world" to the general public that led B.L. (Bert) Coombes, a miner in South Wales, to write his famous autobiography *These Poor Hands* two years later. This was followed, in 1945, by *Miner's Day,* one of the first Penguin specials. Recently republished, Coombes (2021), combined with paintings of the Rhondda by Isobel Alexander, vividly portrays the impact of coalmining upon the valleys and its people, all wracked in the "everlasting war against industrial disease and accident" (p. 156). If support was needed for Diane Reay's description of mining as "a dirty, dangerous and dehumanising job" involving "one long struggle against injustice", it can be found on these pages.

The filth was everywhere—in the air, in the river, lying on the ground and in the waste tips. For Coombes, these tips stood as "monuments to ugliness and slovenliness" (p. 114). They take on a surreal presence in Alexandra's paintings as they did for Lowry when he visited South Wales twenty years later. These tips live on into the present day, threaten villages in time of heavy rain, still surviving the tragedy that hit Aberfan[1] in 1966. The dust, of course, was also found in the lungs of the miners. Between 1931 and 1948, 22,000 miners contracted pneumoconiosis in UK mines, 85 per cent of them in South Wales. It was a plague, and with limited compensation for the afflicted, pneumoconiosis and other lung diseases continued to be the main cause of premature death for miners well into the twenty-first century (McIvor & Johnson, 2016).

Given this, and the impact we now know that coal has had upon the planet, it might seem perverse to offer a defence for the industry or to mourn its passing. But there is more to be said reflected in the deeply mixed feelings of Coombes and other miners who, while hating the thought of going to work, would, once underground, vigorously

[1] The Aberfan disaster was the catastrophic collapse of a colliery spoil tip created on a mountain slope above the village of Aberfan, near Merthyr Tydfil. A period of heavy rain led to a build-up of water within the tip which caused it to suddenly slide downhill as a slurry, killing 116 children and 28 adults as it engulfed Pantglas Junior School and nearby row of houses. A subsequent enquiry placed the blame for the disaster on the NCB.

engage with the "battle against the mountain"! This is what gave mining engineering such a fascination and "the charisma" that Martyn Walker identifies in the post-war period. It was established in career ladders within the mines and in the courses taught in local technical colleges and mining institutes. Nationally, it was found in the NCB's Scientific Research Establishments at Stoke Orchard and Bretby with their persistent concern for developing new engineering methods and clean coal technologies. These teaching and research establishments were run down and eventually closed along with the mines in the late eighties and nineties when the newly privatised UK Coal Corporation turned itself into a property developer, and Bretby was converted into a hotel and conference centre.

In the old *coal and steel towns*, in places like Motherwell, Consett and Ebbw Vale, coking coal mines were grouped around huge inland steel complexes creating a remarkable concentration of unionised manual work which combined internal job ladders with low-level educational entry requirements. Here, miners and steel workers lived close together and shared facilities. In Ebbw Vale, the Workman's Hall was controlled by the Waenlwyd lodge, but (in a similar way to Tannochside Miners' Welfare) it was used by the steel workers and the Labour Party for large meetings. The students at the Grammar School also used it for their annual Eisteddfod walking across the railway line that traversed the main street in order to deliver limestone to the blast furnaces. These were large industrial towns which in the fifties and sixties provided relatively high wages and a stability for large and overwhelmingly working-class communities.

All this employment of course was for men. For generations, the young women of the coalfields were often forced to leave home to work as domestic servants in aristocratic country houses and in the homes of the urban middle classes, normally returning home to marry. Marriage therefore was a fundamental feature of these communities and indispensable to the employment system of mining. While the principle of pit head baths was established by act of parliament in 1920, at the time of nationalisation in 1947, many of the smaller collieries remained without washing facilities which were then often installed a few years before closure. Overalls were not provided by the NCB until 1979, relieving

the household belatedly from the task of washing dirty pit clothes. By this time, many of the changes which accompanied the dramatic closure of mines in the sixties had accelerated. Employment opportunities for women in health care and office work had emerged through the expansion of the welfare state with others found in the new light engineering and garment factories relocated on the old coalfields. This uncoupling of the link between mining and domestic labour created opportunities that were accelerated by feminist ideas, broad changes of attitude and popular culture. When Eric Burdon and the Animals sang "we got to get out of this place… girl there's a better life for me and you", they were speaking for a generation. Expectations changed and classrooms changed too, as Natalie Thomlinson explains, with young people experiencing the emancipatory as well as the oppressive aspects of organised education. In spite of the hidden and not-so hidden injuries of class, some succeeded, went away to university or teacher-training college, few to return.

This was a time of significant working-class gains culminating in the much-maligned seventies and the "profit squeeze" (Glyn & Sutcliffe, 1972). It was followed by Mrs Thatcher as capital struck back in a raft of industrial closures and deep changes to the welfare state. This process was fuelled by policies of marketisation, the destructive and ongoing process of commodification that Karl Polanyi (1944) had identified in the English enclosure movement.

At that time within sociology, the dominant discourse was not of this kind, referring instead to the coming of a post-industrial society (Bell, 1973) linked to ideas of post-Fordism and post-modernism. It took a considerable struggle to establish deindustrialisation as a legitimate *conceptual* framework with its emphasis on power and struggle rather than an inevitable, teleological, process of change. Tim Strangleman and Nicky Stubbs explain how this can be understood as a long process of destruction, renewal and destruction again with complex identities formed along the way, drawing on the past, the present and some imagined futures. These emotions were in play in 1963 when Rootes opened its factory in Renfrewshire to make a new car there—the Hillman Imp—that would, supposedly, challenge the Mini and compete in international rallies. The factory closed in 1971. Similarly, at Uddingston with the Caterpillar factory where its high-tech glossily finished machines

had created an "aura of permanence". In 1987, it was described by the company as "a plant with a future" but within weeks its closure was announced precipitating the workers' occupation used skilfully by Gibbs and Henderson-Bone in their "Tracks of the Past" project. But as the authors remind us, coal was "at the centre of industrial commemoration in Lanarkshire" as it was in most of the other coalfields, and where the past has been drawn on in similar ways in the local classrooms (Mates & Grimshaw, 2021, 2022).

The miners' strike of 1984–85 was a significant milestone here involving untold hardship, bravery and resilience, often bringing out the best and the worst in people and illustrating well Gordon's (2008) view that "life is complex" (p. 4) stretching established understandings of community and solidarity. The strike and its aftermath have been presented in film with the magisterial anger of *Brassed Off* contrasting with the deep sentimentally of *Billy Elliot* and the elegiac *Pride*. As time passed, views of the strike changed, and revisionist accounts have come to explain how it could have been settled earlier, or not happened at all yielding the benefit of a much slower run down of the industry. In reaction to these ideas, one ex-miner in Durham explained to me that:

> I often think how poorer our lives would be without that year. If we had faded away without a fight, I am sure that there would now be no gala to boost our sense of wellbeing each year. But more importantly it became a symbol of resistance.

There was a similar view in Maerdy in South Wales where the mine had been identified during the strike as "the last pit in the Rhondda". As a consequence, one old resident recalled that:

> [P]ress from all over the world had focused on us. And shortly after that the pit shut. It was still fresh in people's memories, right, this one colliery that had stuck it out to the bitter end and reopened was now shutting. If there hadn't been a miners' strike, and Maerdy had shut, OK, it would have been the last pit in the valley, but there wouldn't have been the interest that there was.

Here, we can see the building blocks of memory, the elements that stick together giving a strength to the humour, pride and sensitivity that Kat Simpson identifies as haunting the classroom "in ways that begin to refashion relations of schooling in more encouraging ways". This is the hope. It is a hope that is challenged by the processes of marketisation that are wrecking the infrastructure and the lives of many on the old coalfields where more schools are desperately needed along with better sick pay and welfare provision. In the thirties, during the previous phase of extreme marketisation, Gramsci (1971) identified an interregnum when "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" and when a "great variety of morbid symptoms appear". This was "resolved" through fascism and a world war. We must find a better way.

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