

THE ROAD TO 1984



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*How the 1984/5 UK Miners' Strike has been
represented in fiction*

BY

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Introduction

The Miner's Strike of 1984-5 is viewed by many commentators as a defining moment in British trade union history¹. However, interpreting the social and political significance of the dispute has been contentious from the outset as two related but quite different narratives emerged.

The first of these can be described as the dominant, orthodox or establishment *discourse of total defeat* for the miners and, by extension, the whole trade union movement. This has enabled the political Right to characterise the strike as the rolling back of undue trade union influence in the public realm and a key ideological victory in the building of a new neoliberal consensus in British politics². For large parts of the Left, on the other hand, this same discourse enables the defeat of the miners to be seen as the critical moment from which point it became impossible to believe that the trade union movement could be in the vanguard of social and economic revolution. Whilst this might not mean the end of class on class conflict, industrial muscle alone could no longer be seen as the best way of prosecuting this battle. A significant amount of academic analysis also bought into this discourse and characterised the strike as presenting the wider Labour Movement with game-changing lessons that had to be learned about trade unionism in the modern world and many of these studies centred on issues of leadership and the over-reliance on historical and so-called out-moded notions of trade unionism³.

An alternative to this orthodoxy does exist however and this might be characterised as the *discourse of transformation*. This view holds that the failure by the miners to prevent the pit closures going ahead and the subsequent impact that had on the structure of mining communities could indeed be seen as a defeat in terms of the way industrial disputes have traditionally been judged. However, in the the very nature of this dispute something quite different characterised its impact on all those taking part in the strike or who were, even tangentially, touched by it. Personal and gender relationships were redefined in positive ways, political educations were taken into new territories, power and the impact of power was redefined and in the long march of the Labour Movement⁴ there were lessons about the nature of

¹ A simple internet search for the phrase '1984-5 miner's strike defining moment' throws up several thousand variations of that phrase – including *Wikipedia* and *Blackwell's Reference Online*

² See Norman Tebbit

³ See, for example, Robert Taylor *The trade union question in British politics: Government and Unions since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) and Geoffrey Goodman *The Miners' Strike* (London: Pluto Press, 1985)

⁴ See Eric Hobsbawm (1978) 'The forward march of labour halted?'

trade unionism and its relationship to community and personal identity that have gone unheeded.⁵

To understand why the discourse of defeat has become so dominant and has so effectively eclipsed the discourse of transformation it is useful to refer to Antonio Gramsci's⁶ concept of hegemony. Gramsci argues that hegemony is essentially a process that allows a dominant or powerful group to convince or persuade less powerful groups that their ideas or values should be accepted as a common sense view of the world – what Strinati calls "the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups."⁷ So, for Gramsci, hegemony is only achieved with consent from those governed by the dominant group and that this consent comes, in part, from telling and re-telling a story that goes undisputed. Gramsci further argues that it is possible for other versions of 'the truth' – in this case the discourse of transformation - to challenge this hegemony but it is more difficult and it takes longer to achieve:

If the working class is to achieve hegemony, it needs patiently to build up a network of alliances with social minorities. These new coalitions must respect the autonomy of the movement, so that each group can make its own special contribution toward a new socialist society.⁸

This therefore raises questions about the role that fiction written about the strike has to play in either confirming and reproducing the hegemonic orthodoxy or in challenging it in order to help with the building of an alternative view. The aim of this section of the study is to critique the fiction written about the 1984-5 Miner's Strike and, in particular, to examine the way trade unions, and specifically the National Union of Mineworkers, are presented in those novels and to locate them in respect of the discourses outlined above. The majority of these novels were written and published up to a decade or more after the conclusion of the strike itself and, it will be argued, the views of the authors are inevitably shaped by the public discourse about the strike because they were not themselves present at the time. In this section I will argue that the novels which directly address the nature, history, prosecution and consequences of the strike do so from within the dominant hegemonic discourse and fail in any systematic way to acknowledge

⁵ See for example Michael Bailey and Simon Popple *The 198/85 Miners' Strike : Re-claiming cultural heritage* in Laurajane Smith, Paul A. Shakel and Gary Campbell *Heritage, Labour and the Working Class*

⁶ See <http://marxisttheory.org/antonio-gramsci-theories-of-hegemony-civil-society-and-revolution/>

⁷ (Strinati, 1995: 165)

⁸ <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-gram.htm#hege>

the alternative discourse of transformation. I will also argue that it is this that helps us to understand what otherwise might seem to be a fundamental paradox within this body of literature: how have authors who are ideologically sympathetic to the miner's cause found themselves reproducing dominant discourses which are essentially negative in respect of the impact and consequences of the strike?

Those novels that place the strike at the heart of their action present themselves as representing an uncontested or historically accurate 'truth' about the strike and its consequences – that it was an unmitigated defeat for the labour movement and an individual disaster for the miners who took part - and in doing so they make a key contribution to further confirming the dominant discourse of total defeat that has been constructed around this dispute. In doing this they illustrate the way in which the process of storytelling helps to build and then to reproduce a dominant discourse such as the one that which surrounds the miners strike. However, I will contend that the discourse of total defeat can only exist in the way it does because it rests upon foundations of a much larger body of mythology that surrounds miners and the mining trade unions that have been built over many decades. This set of myths has been created by both the Right and the Left of the political spectrum and, as a result of this myth-making, it has been possible to turn an industrial dispute into a metaphor for the stand-off between conflicting ideologies . I will seek to show that in the popular and political imagination, miners and their unions came, over time, to symbolise the potentially syndicalist⁹ and revolutionary potential of the working class and that as a result their various struggles with employers and the government took on a significance well beyond that normally associated with 'ordinary' industrial disputes and became, in essence, a proxy class war.

I will also seek to argue that in making this particular strike a vehicle for class war, both the Left and the Right have colluded in undermining the *transformative* human dimension of the strike. The impact of the strike on the lives of those involved and the way it shaped, in the longer term, the individuals who took part becomes significantly devalued if these issues are reduced to a simple binary related to 'winning' or 'losing'. The complexity of the human stories arising from this dispute deserve a more sympathetic and nuanced representation than that which is provided within the majority of the fiction written about the strike. It will also be argued that notions of 'winning' or 'losing' are defined too narrowly within criteria determined by commentators fundamentally out of sympathy with the trade unions and the wider labour movement and as a result they fail to recognise the important impact strike action has on the individual involved and the communities they live in.

⁹ Syndicalism - explain

The historical and social context: building the story of the militant miner

The inter-war years

Miners and their trade unions occupy a status within the historical narratives constructed by the post-war British Labour Movement that is unmatched by workers in any other industry. The emergence of the National Union of Mineworkers as what Crick calls the 'shock troops of the labour movement'¹⁰ is based on the coming-together of a number of different strands of political and cultural thinking that, when taken together, make up the story of the historical, political and economic development of mining, mineworkers, their trade unions and their communities.

The unique influence that the mining unions have had on post-war labour activists in particular has led, it can be argued, to the development of an overly-romanticised iconography.¹¹ To begin to understand the way this set of ideas has developed on the political Left, it is important to unpick the way in which miners and their unions have been seen as both heroes of the working class and and, at the same time, victims of a duplicitous and spineless working class leadership cadre prepared always to accommodate a ruling class elite. The roots of this narrative can be found in the events which unfolded around the collapse of the so-called 'Triple Alliance' in 1921¹² and then with the failure of the General Strike in 1926. Pelling¹³, in his discursive history of the trade union movement, describes the failure of the Triple Alliance as a key event resulting in the miners being humiliated and 'accepting heavy cuts in their wages' and that this in turn led to them interpreting their defeat and the collapse of this alliance as a 'betrayal' of the solidarity they had every right to expect from the wider Labour Movement. It has also been a widely held position on the Left of the political spectrum that the Trades Union Council (TUC) were responsible for another act of betrayal against the miners when they abandoned the General Strike without the miners' original grievances being brought to a satisfactory resolution. Perkins¹⁴ in her study of the General Strike provides a description of the end of the miner's resistance in 1926 which reads as if she were describing the end of the dispute in 1984-5, with miners returning to work 'in dribs and drabs' and with the press and the Government rushing to proclaim the whole as 'abject failure'.

¹⁰ Michael Crick *Scargill and the Miners* (London: Penguin, 1985) p12

¹¹ For a good example of this see the Socialist Unity website <http://socialistunity.com/tribute-to-a-lost-industry-british-coal-mining-destroyed-by-thatcher/>

¹² The 'Triple Alliance', an agreement for mutual support and self-defence, was put to the test in 1921 when the level of wages paid to the miners was threatened by private coal companies who were losing Government subsidy. Sympathetic strike action was called in Rail and Transport – the other two arms of the alliance - but aborted by them when new talks were offered. The miners, who remained on strike, felt they had been betrayed – which led to the collapse of the Alliance. This incident became known as Black Friday. (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/black-friday-tuc.htm>)

¹³ Henry Pelling *A History of British Trade Unionism* (London: Macmillan, 1963) pp165-167

¹⁴ Anne Perkins *A Very British Strike: 3 May – 12 May 1926* (London: Macmillan, 2006) pp255-256

Interpreting the events of Black Friday and the General Strike is, of course, part of a highly politicised and conflicted debate. Whether there is sufficient evidence to establish that the miners were unfairly abandoned and left to fend for themselves has been challenged by both academics and activists who claim that the reality is far more complex than that which is captured in the simple narrative of betrayal.¹⁵ However, the subsequent re-examinations and reinterpretations of the circumstances surrounding these two iconic moments have failed to make much of an impact on the popular perception within the Labour Movement which remains wedded to the more romantic interpretation of history. To understand why it is that the trade union movement as a whole seem so determined to hang on to the narrative of betrayal it is important to recognise that miners are seen very differently from almost all other sections of the workforce and acknowledge the unique characteristics of mining as an industrial sector, the nature of mineworkers themselves and the specific characteristics of the mining trade unions. Richards¹⁶ argues that there is something fundamental or essential in the nature of coal mining as a job – the relative danger, where it takes place and how it takes place – that privileges ideas of solidarity and community. He argues that the sense of identity shared by miners enables them to hold a common historical narrative and that this ‘underpinned the fierce resistance put up by miners when their livelihoods and communities are threatened’¹⁷ The mutual interdependency and fraternity between miners facing common dangers naturally forces them together both physically and emotionally and it does not, therefore, require a huge leap of imagination to see why trade unions and the precepts of trade unionism sit so well with the miners’ world-view and why any real or imagined betrayal of this solidarity would have such resonance. It is not by coincidence that the notion of the ‘blackleg’ or ‘scab’ plays such a large part in the folk memory of mining communities.¹⁸ Equally, it is also perfectly understandable that political philosophies of the Left, especially Socialism and Communism, which have placed these notions of solidarity at their very centre, should find relatively fertile ground in these communities.

The emergence of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1920 was a significant event in the context of the mining trade unions in the inter-war years. The idea of a national trade union for mineworkers in the UK is an idea linked closely to that of coal mine nationalisation following the Second World War but prior to this union representation was organised on a regional or ‘Lodge’ structure, with each region having their own leaders and

¹⁵ Patrick Renshaw *The General Strike* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975) pp250-251

¹⁶ Andrew J. Richards *Miners on strike: class solidarity and division in Britain* (Oxford: Berg, 1996) pp16-32

¹⁷ *Ibid* p32.

¹⁸ See for example the history of the Blackleg Miner in folk song at <http://mainlynorfolk.info/louis.killen/songs/blacklegminers.html>

committees to engage with employers at the local level. Speaking of the Durham miners, Bulmer¹⁹ notes that:

Collective action of a political kind took two closely related forms, the long and bitter struggles against hostile employers through the local Lodges....and the development of a working-class political movement...which found expression in the Labour Party.

Whilst it is true that the Labour Party seemed a natural home for those with democratic socialist aspirations, for those in mining communities where privation and hardship were historic and endemic – especially in Wales and Scotland – a stronger, revolutionary rhetoric proved to be more appealing and the Communist Party of Great Britain was well placed to provide the ideological underpinning for that radical tendency. Will Payntor and Arthur Horner, both early members of the CPGB, would graduate from leading the Welsh miners to becoming General Secretaries of the NUM. Whilst in Scotland, Abe, Alex and Dave Moffat became the legendary leaders of the miners in Fife where they were reputed to have created their own 'Little Moscow'²⁰

In addition to the social, political and community solidarity engendered by mining as an occupation, miners themselves have frequently been depicted as special or even as 'elemental'.²¹ Bryant²² goes further claiming that coal miners function 'as objects of bourgeois male identification and desire' in poetry, prose and film. Homo-erotic imagery in depictions of miners underground abound and mix with a frank admiration for the sheer physical prowess on show. George Orwell's essay *Down the Mine*²³, which is essentially a preliminary sketch for his longer examination of coal mining in *The Road To Wigan Pier*²⁴, articulates this admiration thus:

The fillers look and work as though they were made of iron. They really do look like iron hammered iron statues--under the smooth coat of coal dust which clings to them from head to foot. It is only when you see miners down the mine and naked that you realize what splendid men they are. Most of them are small (big men are at a disadvantage in that job) but nearly all of them have the most noble bodies; wide shoulders tapering to slender supple waists, and small pronounced buttocks and sinewy thighs, with not an ounce of waste

¹⁹ Martin Bulmer (ed) *Mining and social change* (London: Croom Helm, 1978) pp26-27

²⁰ Graham Stevenson *Abe, Alex and Dave Moffat*

http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=411:abe-alex-and-dave-moffat&catid=13:m&Itemid=114

²¹ See, for example Beatrix Campbell *Wigan Pier Revisited* (London, Virago 1984) p97

²² Marsha Bryant *W.H.Auden and the homoerotics of the 1930s documentary* in William B.Thesing (ed) *Caverns of Night: coal mines in art, literature and film* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2000) p104

²³ George Orwell *Down the Mine* (1937)

²⁴ George Orwell *The Road To Wigan Pier*(1937)

flesh anywhere. In the hotter mines they wear only a pair of thin drawers, clogs and knee-pads; in the hottest mines of all, only the clogs and knee-pads.

The admiring and even erotic scrutiny of the miners as objects of desire by predominantly middle class artists raises the issue of the way in which class conflicts are either played out or sublimated within the arts. The frisson of desire – ‘the homoerotic dynamics of [the] male-on-male gaze’²⁵ – can be interpreted as an emotion which is similar, or at least closely related to, the visceral thrill that is implicit in the violence of class conflict.²⁶ Consequently, the miner comes to embody not just hormonal animal prowess but also through the brute power latent in this physicality, an implicit challenge to the dominance of middle class hegemony. In short, the miner becomes the living symbol of the power of the working class and an admonition of effete middle class values.²⁷

Importantly, both Campbell²⁸ and Clarke²⁹ make the point that beyond this highly eroticised body politics, commentators, including Orwell, also saw miners as symbolic of actual political power. If the working class were ever to challenge the dominance of middle class power they would need a role-model, a template against which to measure their own stature and political potency. The coal miner is the very embodiment of the potential power of the proletariat and his characteristics and values provide a desirable alternative to those of the capitalist orthodoxy. In their personal behaviour, their commitment to collective community and in their solidarity miners represented an ‘implicit contrast [to the]..dislocated middle classes.’³⁰

The miner in inter-war years fiction

The idea that miners and their communities represent something special within the panoply of working class life is reinforced by the fiction that life in mining communities has generated, both domestically and internationally. The popularity of mining as a subject for fiction has been noted by Fraser³¹ who speaks of coal mining as a ‘naturalistic metaphor’ ideally designed to ‘carry the symbolic weight of a work’. He goes on to make the following observation:

²⁵ Marsha Bryant *op cit* p116

²⁶ See, for example, Barbara Ehrenreich *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989)

²⁷ The notion that an decadent middle class could only be animated by thoughts of it’s own destruction was a theme developed by George Bernard Shaw in his play *Heartbreak House* (London: Constable, 1919)

²⁸ Beatrix Campbell *Op cit* pp97-98

²⁹ Ben Clarke (2008) *Noble Bodies: Orwell, Miners and Masculinity* *English Studies*, 89:4 pp427-446

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ Tom Frazier *Coal mining, literature and the naturalistic motif* in William Thesing p199

But why does coal mining stand out above other economic structures as a viable motif? It is most likely because of the very nature of the industry. Mining seems the most unnatural means of attaining a livelihood from the ground...individuals must dig and claw their way into the deep recesses of the earth.³²

Not only does mining seem to offer something elemental it also provides an environment which is one that is recognised universally. The nature of the mining experience knows no international borders and a description of a mine and those who work down it are as relevant in Britain as they are in any other part of the world.³³ As a result, descriptions of the conditions miners work in and their trials and tribulations are also universal. Given the commonly experienced hardships and problems faced by all miners it is not surprising that they also share a widely acknowledged industrial and political radicalism and it is because of this, Frazer argues, that novelists find the subject matter a 'suitable vehicle for their aesthetic and philosophical biases'.³⁴

Mining has also been unusual in producing a body of fiction written by miners or ex-miners themselves. The novels of authors such as Lewis Jones³⁵, Glyn Jones³⁶, Harold Hislop³⁷ and Walter Brierley³⁸ all prefigure the work discussed in Section Two of this study but come from a similar inspiration – a desire to make the links between the everyday experience of the working man and the ideology of the Communist Party. Despite the fact that these books choose to present themselves in an almost documentary realist style, it is clear that, as Dai Smith³⁹ asserts, these are not a faithful representation of events but a carefully reconstructed reality which relies on a particular political and dialectic framework. As a result, these novels not only reflected the prevailing mythologies about miners (that they are in some way special as individuals and as a community and have been uniquely 'betrayed' by their union comrades) but also helped to define and build these myths. David Bell⁴⁰ notes that Raymond Williams believed the novels of Lewis and Glyn Jones showed the depth of their 'sense of defeat following the General Strike' and that this was not felt individually but communally and was to some extent 'instrumental in determining the nature of the Welsh miners' novels'. Williams also notes, however, that although this sense of defeat creates a tendency

³² Ibid pp199-200

³³ The best known examples of mining novels that illustrate the way key themes in the lives of mining communities cross boundaries are Emile Zola's *Germinal* (Oxford: OUP, 1993) and Upton Sinclair's *King Coal* (London: Macmillan, 1917).

³⁴ Ibid p200

³⁵ Lewis Jones *Cwmardy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937) and *We Live* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1939)

³⁶ Glyn Jones *Times Like These* (London: Gollancz, 1936)

³⁷ Harold Heslop *Last cage Down* (London: Wishart Books, 1935)

³⁸ Walter Brierley *Means Test Man* (London: Methuen, 1936)

³⁹ Dai Smith *Introduction* in Lewis Jones *Cwmardy op cit.*

⁴⁰ David Bell *Ardent propaganda: Miners' novels and class conflict 1929-39* (Upsala: Swedish Science Press, 1995) p10

towards insularity within these working class novelists, rather than turn to look for help from the outside world and potentially suffer further betrayal, they turn to solidarity within the family and the community to buttress their sense of identity.⁴¹

Post war status of the miner

Despite the fact that public perception of the miner and the miners' unions in the 1930s had clearly been shaped by a political and cultural output that emphasised their unique solidarity and stoicism, in reality, far from being the crucible of revolution the miners trade unions were on the back foot and '[had never] been driven so low as in the years 1930-1934'.⁴² However, a significant change in the fortunes and status of the miner and the mining industry was brought about by two key separate but related events – war and nationalisation. As Page Arnot⁴³ makes clear it was the country's need to secure coal supplies that effectively pushed forward the decision to bring the whole industry under state control, removing it from the hands of sundry private owners. This also proved to be the catalyst for the emergence of the a single unified trade union organisation – The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

The perception (if not the reality) that this important industry had finally come under the control of 'the people' and, more specifically, the miners who worked the pits, led to nationalisation being seen as a defining and essentially liberating moment.⁴⁴ That is not to say there were no doubts on the Left about just how much real influence this would give the working miner – the CPGB warned on numerous occasions that nationalisation would not lead to a more democratic shared ownership if the old managerial class that had run the private industries simply moved into equivalent managerial roles within the nationalised industry. Indeed, Andrew Taylor argues that:

Nationalisation had enmeshed the NUM in a pattern of industrial and political relationships and procedures which were designed to canalise and neutralise the industry's *legendary* (my emphasis) propensity for industrial action and thereby place the miners and their industry at the service of the national interest as defined by government.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Raymond Williams "Working Class, Proletarian, Socialist : Problems in some Welsh novels" in H. Gustav Klaus(ed) *The Socialist novel in Britain: Towards the Recovery of a Tradition* (Brighton: Harvester press, 1982)

⁴² R. Page Arnot *The Miners : One Industry, One Union* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979) p4

⁴³ Ibid pp9-15

⁴⁴ At the NUM Special Conference of 20th December 1946, the NUM General Secretary Arthur Horner said 'The task in future is to use the best means we know to fight Mother Nature and drag the coal out of her bosom. The future that lies before us is tremendous. The pits are ours. We can say what can be done with them.' Cited by Page Arnot Ibid p198

⁴⁵ Andrew Taylor *The NUM and British Politics: Volume 2 1969-1995* p2

What is clear however is that nationalisation and the frequently stated importance of coal production to the country's economic and social interest raised the profile of the miner and his trade union to new heights. But, Richards suggests, this higher public profile was not based on a real and established record of radicalism but a kind of 'assumed' militancy generated by the myth of the miner rather than the reality. What the evidence shows is that strike action⁴⁶ was, in fact, very rare indeed and the period from the end of World War Two until the start of the 1970s saw no major national disputes in the industry. Maybe as a result of this lack of militant action, very little fiction written in the post-war period⁴⁷ is set either within the contemporary mining industry or with coal mining as a backdrop and those that are draw heavily on the struggles of the miners in the pre-nationalisation, inter-war years. Menna Gallie's *Strike For A Kingdom*⁴⁸ written in 1959 focuses on a Welsh mining community in the period immediately following the 1926 General Strike and she continued to focus on that same community in *The Small Mine*⁴⁹ which was written three years later and shows the same community immediately following Nationalisation. Gallie's novels rely heavily on the tropes of miners and their communities already well established by this time – tight but volatile family units, a strong sense of community and a common identity forged from facing constant danger and a community that feels in some sense betrayed. J.B. Pick's *Out of the Pit*⁵⁰ explores the possibility of escape from these communities although, ultimately the means of escape constructed by the author is unrealistic and half-hearted – as if Pick himself didn't really believe escape to be likely or even desirable. William McIllvany's *Docherty*⁵¹ set in a Scottish mining community also looks backwards – even further – to the early years of the 20th century and again explores both the nature of close-knit mining communities and the conflicts of being the patriarch of a family deeply steeped in the deprivations of extreme poverty.

Clancy Sigal's interesting experiment with 'faction', *Weekend in Dinlock*⁵², rather neatly brings together all of the common characteristics of miners and their communities and produces something that is perilously close to a stereotype. Written as a piece of journalism or ethnographic sociology, *Weekend in Dinlock* clearly owes a great debt to Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* in its conceptualisation with an outsider (this time a North American) gaining access to the everyday lives of miners and their communities. However, unlike Orwell who located his work in the real world of Wigan, Sigal is upfront about the fact that Dinlock is a fictional amalgam. In his Author's Note he thanks his friends in the 'north of England' and says:

⁴⁶ Andrew Richards Op. cit. p6

⁴⁷ Other than those books written by CPGB members for largely propaganda purposes and analysed in the second chapter of this study

⁴⁸ Menna Gallie *Strike For A Kingdom* (Gollancz, 1959)

⁴⁹ Menna Gallie *the Small Mine* (Gollancz, 1962)

⁵⁰ J.B. Pick *Out of the Pit* (Faber, 1951)

⁵¹ William McIllvany *Docherty* (Allen & Unwin, 1975)

⁵² Clancy Segal *Weekend in Dinlock* (Secker & Warburg, 1960)

At the least, I can assure you that neither you nor your particular village will be found within these pages. Dinlock is imaginary, in that it is many places I have seen, and its people are not 'real' except in the sense that they are the sum of the total of what I wish to say about what I saw.⁵³

The significance of Sigal's book is not in revelation but in confirmation. There is nothing new here, quite the contrary. What Sigal skilfully presents is the popular, established image of the miner and the miner's community that had been built in the public consciousness over half a century.

Although Richards⁵⁴ cautions us to be wary of the idea of the miner as a political or industrial militant, by the early 1970s the coming together of a more antagonistic political environment and a sharply deteriorating national economic outlook would start to make the notion of the militant miner look like a more portrait. The decision by OPEC⁵⁵ to limit the supply of oil on the open market and thereby increase its cost had a massive depressive and recessionary impact on a number of Western economies and this included the UK. The increased cost of oil to the manufacturing sector put upward pressure on prices and fuelled an inflationary spiral and this was responded to by trade union negotiators being significantly more aggressive in seeking pay rises that would keep pace with this inflationary pressure. One consequence of this was that the period of industrial peace, even co-operation, between miners and management in the mining industry began to unravel. The coming together of these deteriorating economic indicators at the same time as the election of a Conservative government who professed themselves unwilling to bow to trade union pressure resulted in the writing of a new chapter in the mythology of the miners and the NUM.

Industrial victories and new political enemies

In January 1972 the first national strike in the coalfields since 1926 took place over the issue of pay. Against the background of high price inflation the NUM lodged a claim for a 41% pay increase at a time when the Government's position on pay settlements was that no industry should breach a 7% ceiling.⁵⁶ The President of the NUM at the time, Joe Gormley, was naturally inclined towards moderation and caution but the day to day prosecution of the strike fell to the regional leaders who were a younger, more activist group that included Arthur Scargill, a Labour Party member but

⁵³ Clancy Sigal : introduction to the novel

⁵⁴ Andrew J. Richards *Miners on Strike : Class solidarity and division in Britain* (Bloomsbury 1997)

⁵⁵ See, for example, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/opec-states-declare-oil-embargo>

⁵⁶ Hywel Francis and David Smith *The Fed* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1980)

formerly in the Communist Party, and Mick McGahey who had remained a CP member and had a reputation for being an implacable Tankie.⁵⁷

The strategy these Regional leaders devised for the 1972 strike would have far-reaching consequences, not just in how it contributed to the mythology of the NUM but also on the way these tactics would influence the strike strategies of the wider trade union movement and, ultimately, the Government's shaping of legislation that would curtail the freedom of trade unions to behave in this way. At the heart of Scargill and McGahey's plan was the use of the flying picket,⁵⁸ groups of striking miners rapidly deployed to picket secondary workplaces and prevent the movement or use of coal by industries heavily dependent on it. The iconic and pivotal moment in this strike was the incident that has become a legendary victory within the annals of the labour movement and a moment of notorious infamy amongst those on the Right – the closing of the Saltley Gate coking plant in Birmingham on 10th February 1972. Pickets from the NUM arrived at the coking plant to try and prevent lorries leaving the yard to take deliveries to power stations around the country and they might well have failed in their aims were it not for the support of the AUEW and their willingness to call a sympathy strike on that day. This piece of sympathy or secondary action enabled a mass picket of engineers to be mobilised⁵⁹ and it was the size of that picket which led the police to order the closing of the coke plant for fear of injury to any person caught up in the mêlée.

In 2003, Alan Travis writing in *The Guardian*⁶⁰ described the political trauma inflicted on the Conservative government by the success of the miners and their strike tactics. Examining the release of Cabinet papers from that time Travis was able to show that the impact of Saltley Gate was profound and quotes Douglas Hurd, then Edward Heath's private secretary as saying "the government was wandering around the battlefield looking for someone to surrender to." Following this the outcome of the strike was inevitable with the miners winning a substantial 27% pay rise. The impact of this was to be far reaching as Andy Beckett notes:

Within hours of the closure of the Saltley gates, the Cabinet resolved that 'the Secretary of State for Employment, in consultation with the Attorney-General, should arrange for the law governing picketing to be reviewed'. The minutes do not record a contribution on the subject from Margaret Thatcher, but she wrote in her memoirs:

⁵⁷ The term 'Tankie' was commonly used slang parlance within the Communist Party to denote hard-line Stalinists who supported the Soviet Union's enforcement of its sphere of influence by the use of military might.

⁵⁸ See Andy Beckett *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (2009 London: Faber & Faber pp7--87) for a detailed account of the 1972 strike.

⁵⁹ The events of Saltley Gate have been collated into a website dedicated to it <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/jan/01/past.politics1> . This website contains a transcript of the recreation of the trade union action by Banner Theatre.

⁶⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/jan/01/past.politics1>

'For me, what happened at Saltley took on no less significance than it did for the Left.'⁶¹

Prime Minister Heath's trouble with the miners was not, however, settled in this single humiliating defeat because two years later, emboldened by their victory in 1972, the NUM again began to threaten strike action in defence of their pay levels. Following the 1972 strike miners pay was close to the top of the skilled manual workers league table but by 1974 their position had eroded to 18th and was in danger of slipping further as inflation continued to edge upwards. In this dispute the Conservative government avoided a showdown based on industrial muscle and instead went for a political solution by calling a General Election based on a slogan provided by the tabloid press: 'Who Governs Britain?'⁶² Clearly hoping for an endorsement of their tough stance against the miners pay demands the Conservatives found themselves again humiliated and this time ejected from Government in favour of a Labour administration (with Michael Foot taking a lead on negotiations) who moved rapidly to settle with the miners through the use of an 'independent' Pay Review Board report and recommendations. As a corollary to this the miners also won enhanced pension rights and a pneumoconiosis compensation scheme. However, as Edwards and Heery⁶³ point out, the pay and conditions package was in some ways the least important part of the 1974 settlement. They highlight the emergence of a joint planning forum for an energy strategy as the most significant aspect of the final agreement:

The most significant procedural concession to the union was the negotiation of a tripartite agreement to determine the future of the industry. The NUM was the signatory both to the 1974 *Plan for Coal*, which established ambitious output targets for the industry, and to its later revision in 1977.⁶⁴

Both the perceived humiliations of the Conservative Party in government and the commitment by the NUM to *The Plan for Coal* would return as significant factors in 1984-5 strike. However, in the short term, the highly practical and effective policy of using flying pickets and the ability of the NUM leadership to tap into wider support from other trade unions (possibly driven by a historical sense of guilt over previous betrayals and a fundamental belief in the latent power of a working class in solidarity) meant that the notion of the 'invincible' miners and their trade union began to develop as a concept not just on the Left but in the wider general public sphere. The fear and antagonism this generated within Conservative and other Right-wing ranks served to ratchet up still further the mythological

⁶¹ Beckett op cit p84

⁶² Andy Beckett's *When the Lights Went Out* pp145-150 again provides a valuable overview of the dispute, placing it in its important political context.

⁶³ Christine Edwards and Edmund Heery *Management Control and Union Power: A Study of Labour Relations in Coal-Mining* (Oxford: OUP, 1989)

⁶⁴ Ibid p198

status of the 'militant miner' and enhanced the idea that this was an industrial group with unprecedented power because of their perceived ability to bring the nation to a standstill.

The successes of the miners in 1972 and 1974 occupied plenty of journalistic column inches⁶⁵ and both of these strikes have been analysed in terms of their impact on politics and industrial relations. However, it is significant that neither of the disputes generated any imaginative fiction or much in the way of creative writing. It seems that perceived victory in industrial relations terms is not as inspiring to novelists as perceived defeat.

Contextualising the 1984-5 strike

Detailed analysis of the 1972 and 1974 miners strikes is relatively thin on the ground even within the literature of industrial relations and labour studies.⁶⁶ This contrasts sharply with the amount of analysis – academic, journalistic, cultural and artistic – that exists around the 1984-5 strike. The Working Class Movement Library in Salford,⁶⁷ for example, lists 256 documents in its library and archive while Sheffield Libraries, Archive and Information service has a dedicated resource for the study of the strike and a catalogue of books, articles and ephemera that runs to over twelve pages of A4.⁶⁸

The origins of the 84-85 strike as an industrial conflict do not seem to be significantly contested. Immediately following the Conservative Party's 1983 election victory, the National Coal Board (NCB) announced its intention to cut 65,000 jobs from the industry over five years and this propelled the NUM, rather against its will, into adopting an emergency motion at their annual conference that same year which committed them to resisting this retrenchment in the industry.⁶⁹ Richards notes however that the NUM leadership was far from united about the potential call for strike action and quotes the leader of the North Derbyshire Branch urging the delegates to 'stop basking in the glory of 1972 and 1974. It's a completely different ball game.'⁷⁰ The appointment of a new NCB Chairman, Ian McGregor, who had implemented a dramatic cuts programme in British Steel in the autumn of 1983 accelerated the confrontation between the Board and the NUM. A number of small scale local disputes and a fractious overtime ban provided the background to the announcement on 1st March 1984 of the closure of Cortonwood, a South Yorkshire pit. This was a seemingly intentionally provocative step given that very short notice of closure was provided to the

⁶⁵ Coverage of the 1974 strike, for example, can be seen in the archives of The Guardian Newspaper at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/gallery/2009/apr/16/past-conservatives>

⁶⁶ Pitt – Kent Taylor NUM

⁶⁷ <http://www.wcml.org.uk/catalogue/>

⁶⁸ <https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/libraries/archives-and-local-studies/research-guides/miners-strike.html>

⁶⁹ Richards p95

⁷⁰ Ibid p95

union, a move which clearly breached the agreed negotiating process, and the pit was nowhere near exhausting its minable coal reserves. The walkout of the workforce was made official by the union on 9th March and the commencement of the year long strike can be marked from this date. The decision by the NUM national executive to rely on a mandate for strike action that had been given in broad and general terms to the leadership at the previous year's annual conference created a schism within the NUM from the outset. The strong levels of Regional autonomy that still existed within the union structure meant that officials who were less keen on taking action were able to challenge the authority of the executive to call all members out on strike, arguing that the conference decision was merely an enabling rather than a binding motion. Several regions, predominantly in the Midlands, began to demand a new national ballot and the decision of the executive not to grant that and to rely instead on members who were reluctant to strike being picketed-out would turn out to be one of the defining moments because of the way the dispute was able then to be presented by a hostile press and government as anti-democratic and a victory for union bully tactics.

It can be argued that had the strike taken place simply within this industrial relations context it may well have attracted little more attention than the 1972 or 1974 strikes had. However, it was the wider political backcloth to this strike that introduced a new dimension to this dispute and this merits more explanation because this goes to the heart of the 'total defeat' discourse and helps to explain how that came to dominate public perceptions of the dispute. There is a degree of consensus amongst commentators on both the Left and Right of the political spectrum have seen the strike as an important event in the emergence of a neoliberal political and economic agenda⁷¹ in the advanced Western economies. Klein⁷², for example, argues that the neoliberal model of capitalism requires the cover of economic disaster or strife to act as both a camouflage for what might otherwise be perceived as undesirable changes in the relationship between the State and the citizen but also as an excuse to degrade the capability of those organisations who might oppose the progress of the neo-liberal discourse. David Harvey⁷³ argues that the strategy adopted by British neoliberals in the late 1970s and early 1980s characterised the trade union movement as an oppositionalist force that needed to be broken in order that unrestrained free-market capitalism and individualism could prevail. Norman Tebbit who held a number of senior positions within the Conservative Party in the 1980s spoke in terms confronting trade unions, and the miners in particular, as a necessary part of a wider 'rebalancing' of society. For him and those who shared his political position the dispute was not just about the 'modernisation'

⁷² Naomi Klein *The Shock Doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism* (Allen Lane, 2007)

⁷³ David Harvey *A Brief history of Neoliberalism* (2009 Oxford: OUP) pp57-60.

of an ailing economy but about the seizing back of democratic power from unrepresentative and over-powerful trade union leaders.⁷⁴

What is also recognised in virtually all subsequent analyses of the strike is that the way the government handled this dispute went beyond the furtherance of a grand socio-economic plan and amounted to the exacting of political revenge. The political humiliation experienced by the Heath government in the 1970s combined with the potency of the myth of the militant miner that had grown so strong within the Labour Movement produced a set of circumstances that transmuted the confrontation between the miners and the government into a showdown not just between competing ideological positions but a battle specifically between the leaders of the NUM and leading members of the Conservative Party, particularly the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the outcome of which would do so much to define the terms of political debate for future generations. The determination to exact political revenge combined with the need to create the right social and economic conditions for the neoliberal political project created explains the government's assiduous advanced planning for this dispute, its deliberately provocative enhanced pit closure programme and the 'militarisation' of the police force which would ensure its goals were met. Add to that the harnessing of the covert forces of state (MI5 and MI6) and it is clear that this was a battle that the government felt it could not lose and for which no tactic was out of bounds.⁷⁵ Whilst the decision to take on the miners and their supporters was clearly always going to be something of a gamble politically as well as practically the government's calculation that this was a battle they could win was based on the belief that if the NUM could be broken the whole of the Labour movement would be more likely to acquiesce to the kind of wholesale industrial restructuring demanded by neoliberalism. And, of course, this outcome would not just be in the interests of the government but also significant for those agencies who stood to gain power, influence and financial reward from the neo-liberal orthodoxy. As a result, the government was able to rely on the support of major business conglomerations, newspaper barons and large swathes of the broadcast media to do their part in the propaganda war⁷⁶ and was crucial in building the hegemonic narrative of total defeat.

A relatively small number of journalists, artists, film-makers (as well as miners themselves, their wives, their families and supporters with very little experience of speaking, performing or writing for public performance or

⁷⁴ Norman Tebbit *Battle for Britain* *Daily Mail* on-line (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1159851/Battle-Britain-Norman-Tebbit-reveals-believes-defeat-miners-strike-death-democracy.html#ixzz1K9Gmv1eL>) (2009) [accessed 5th June 2011]

⁷⁵ Seamus Milne *The Enemy Within: MI5, Maxwell and the Scargill Affair* (Verso, 1994)

⁷⁶ D. Jones *Media hits the Pits* (Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, 1994)

consumption) attempted to challenge the emergence of this dominant discourse but they struggled to find outlets for their work and, in any case, these dissenting voices had little chance of challenging a set of messages that were being repeated on a daily, if not hourly, basis by those interests keen to see the government's agenda prevail.⁷⁷ In His review of *Shafted : The Media, the Miner' Strike and the Aftermath*, Stan Moore of the Working Lives Research Institute highlights the way some journalists now reflect on their role:

A number of journalists reflect on their role in the strike and are troubled, as Jones admits: "I got ensnared by the seeming inevitability of the Thatcherite story line that the mineworkers had to be defeated in order to smash trade union militancy." He suggests that perhaps the news media should own up to a collective failure of judgment, and concludes that while the role of the media was not decisive to the final outcome of the strike, if its "near-unanimous narrative had not been so hostile to the NUM and had done more to challenge government then Thatcher may have been forced to reach a negotiated settlement during the initial phase of the dispute".⁷⁸

But as Moore goes on to argue in the same review, being wise after the event does little to reverse the stranglehold of the dominant discourse. What is also notable is how negligible a role creative writing or fiction (other than that produced by miners and their families and discussed later in this section) had to play in challenging the terms of the debate about the strike within the political or cultural sphere. Katy Shaw⁷⁹ notes that the cause of concern is not just the absence of contemporary fiction by established writers but what she calls 'the neglect and negation of strikers' writing' and the way this has been marginalised after the strike by privileging 'professional authors, with little or no direct experience of the 1984-5 strike'.⁸⁰

When we turn to the, still limited, body of fiction that does exist about the strike which has been produced by those professional writers Shaw refers to, it is possible to see them as occupying two related but distinct categories: novels that use the miners strike as backdrop or backcloth against which to locate a set of concerns other than those of the miners and their strike, and, novels that focus on the strike itself *as* the central story.

⁷⁷ No author *Shafted: The Media, the Miners Strike and the Aftermath* (Campaign for Broadcasting Freedom, 2009)

⁷⁸ <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/406688.article>

⁷⁹ Katy Shaw *Mining the Meaning*

⁸⁰ Ibid p143

The strike in fiction : backcloth and scenery

As we have seen, the powerful myth of the militant miner as the embodiment of a labour movement capable of challenging the interests of the capitalist class did not lead to a significant body of imaginative writing that celebrated that status nor did the industrial disputes which helped cement their standing in the 1970s get any attention from the novelists of the day. However, the way in which the dominant discourse of total defeat for the miners in the 1984-5 strike was constructed so quickly and established itself so thoroughly meant that it was possible for many novelists, coming to the strike as an essentially historical event they had not themselves witnessed, could adopt and use this ready-made discourse to signify some wider 'truths' about the nature of sacrifice, loss of community, struggle, leadership and power. Most significantly for those novelists who have sympathy with the politics of the Left, the discourse of defeat could be used as a practical embodiment of their own despair at living in a country that had turned decisively to the right. Seeing the defeat of the miners instrumentally, as *inevitability* leading to the triumph of a new neoliberal orthodoxy as the dominant socio-political ideology, provides a relatively easy way of explaining something which is, in reality, far more complex. Seen from what is essentially an historical perspective and through the lens of a discourse of total defeat, the strike offers the creative writer the chance to reduce the strike from the complex to the relatively simple and to use the dispute as a fable or moral tale in ways that are not dissimilar to George Orwell's use of the emergent Soviet Union as an allegorical backcloth in his novel of totalitarianism, *Animal Farm*.⁸¹

The creation of a dominant, hegemonic myth is not, of course, unique to miners or the miners strike of 1984-5. In seeking to understand the way in which a dominant myth can emerge, we can look to previous examples of the way extreme social dislocation has resulted in the creation of an orthodox interpretation of events which dominates and even prevents the emergence of alternative interpretations. Given the way in which novels of the strike use the lexicon and imagery of war and conflict, it is, perhaps, instructive as a starting point to look at the way in which dominant ideas relating to the conduct and outcome of the First World War have emerged. Dan Todman⁸² writing about the public, cultural and political perceptions of the First World War argues that alternative narratives about that conflict have become almost impossible to contemplate seriously because of the power of myth-making. We have, he argues, become accustomed to talk about that war in terms of unprecedented death, squalor, incompetent leadership and futile outcomes

⁸¹ George Orwell *Animal Farm* (Secker and Warburg, 1945)

⁸² Dan Todman, *The Great War ; myth and memory* (London : Hambledon Continuum, 2005)

and any attempt to question these myths has to struggle against a legacy of literary and historical output that uses mythology as its starting point:

The myth of mud and horror clearly changed its status over time. Some cultural analysts would talk about this in terms of a shift from emergence, through dominance, to universality and hegemony. What they would mean is that the myth developed from something that some people thought, to something that most people thought, to the point where it was what everyone knew. That change was important because it meant that ideas were no longer challenged. Indeed [...] a challenge to such received opinions only resulted in a strengthening of their beliefs.⁸³

It is clear from Todman's comments that myth can create, through the control of discourse, a 'common sense' or universally received version of events that is hard to challenge. The relationship between Todman's characterisation of the way in which so much of the First World War is understood through the historical mythology created about it rather than through the evidence relating to the real experience has clear and quite remarkable echoes of the way the 1984-5 strike mythology has been created.

However, myth creation does not happen in a social or political vacuum and it is informative to understand who is in control of the process. Margaret Gonzalez-Perez in her article on myth and literature as political ideology talks of myth as a way of defending and promoting the interests of the establishment:

Myth helps create the fundamental self-image and purpose of the state and provides a sense of past as well as a direction for the future. Traditional myth operates not only as a construct in which to view one's environment, but as a driving and motivating force for action. Successful myth must unify and create a national entity greater than the sum of its political parts.⁸⁴

Using Gonzalez-Perez's argument in the context of the miners' strike, it is clear that the State sees the creation of a dominant or hegemonic myth relating to the absolute defeat of the miners as necessary for the continued stability of the dominant political ideology. The work of Roland Barthes lends support to this argument. In *Mythologies*⁸⁵ Barthes seeks to explain the way in which myths are created and their function in modern society. In much the same way that Todman articulates the functioning of myths about the First World War, Barthes also accepts that myth-making is a process built around

⁸³ Ibid., p40

⁸⁴ I Margaret Gonzales-Perez, 'Myth and literature as political ideology' *Quarterly Journal of Ideology* 3, 24 (2001) , p1.

discourse development and the creation of hegemonic ideas. Barthes describes a process in which myth 'transforms history into nature'— images of the past are given new identity and significance through the power of hegemonic discourse and made to seem as if they describe 'reality'.⁸⁶ Barthes, like Gonzalez-Perez, believes that myth-making is essentially a tool which provides a crucial ideological underpinning for the bourgeois view of the world:

It is through their rhetoric that bourgeois myths outline the general prospect of this *pseudo-physis* [*false nature*] which defines the dream of the contemporary bourgeois world.⁸⁷

For novelists looking back from a post-strike perspective these myths provide a ready-made historical moment of crisis against which they can set the action of their own stories and plot-lines but crucially, within a framework established by the dominant ideology that created that myth. Several novels use the strike in this way for the purposes of locating action either in a particular historical moment or in the context of an assumed political tipping point. Two novels published soon after the end of the strike, in 1985 and 1986 respectively, set their action in and about communities involved in the dispute but offer virtually no commentary on the nature and outcome of the strike itself. In both cases the strike simply offers a historical moment in time which acts as a convenient culmination to a larger and more complex historical and political drama or provides the context for a family saga of life in a working class (mining) community. Raymond Williams' *Loyalties*⁸⁸ combines an analysis of the British Left from the 1930s through to the mid-Eighties with a thriller/espionage sub-plot that allows Williams to explore the nature of patriotism, loyalty and intellectual honesty. Although the miners strike provides some historical context at the end of the novel and allows Williams to re-visit some of his key themes – loyalty and treachery in particular, the strike itself is never a real presence in the book. Indeed, Tony Pinkney, who has written one of the few detailed critiques of Williams' body of fiction, does not even mention the strike section of the book as having any real significance to Williams' overall intent. He characterises the social issues addressed by *Loyalties* as being:

the relations of left-wing Cambridge intellectuals and Welsh mining families in the 1930s and beyond; the nature of the Communist Party and its relation to post-war British politics; the dilemma of 'loyalty' faced by the Cambridge graduate Norman Braose...and by Gwyn Lewis, who must somehow settle the conflicting claims upon him...

⁸⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Paladin, 1989), p. 129.

⁸⁷ Ibid. p150

⁸⁸ Raymond Williams *Loyalties*

Whilst it is clearly the case that, for Williams, the strike is simply another episode in a much longer historical narrative, Tom Davies' *Black Sunlight*⁸⁹ does offer a more detailed take on the dispute. Like Williams before him Davies is interested in writing a novel that takes the long view of a specific community – in this case a fictional Welsh mining community - and exploring the conditions that shape the lives of the people who live in it. The story looks back over the lives of a generation of miners who grew up in the village during the 50s and 60s and follows them through to the strike in 84-5. The core of the novel focusses on the stormy relationship between the unpredictable and occasionally feckless Glynmor Jones, his wife Maggie and their disabled son, Huw and in this family saga the strike itself only occupies the final quarter of the book. Davies is clearly most interested in family and community dynamics and in the evolving relationship between these three characters and in his concerns for a way of life and a set of values that are being eclipsed and which ultimately cannot be defended. The strike is used primarily to symbolise the futility of resisting change and the inevitability that the old values of this community will be swept away by a new, less caring, future. In a final desperate gesture of defiance as the strike collapses around them, Glynmor, who has been transformed by the strike into firebrand union leader, tries to organise an occupation of the pit to save it from closure and to establish the principle that this is a 'people's pit':

And, come the sunshine dawn, there was a high wall of rocks and slurry over the road and all around the front of the pit. On top of the mound there was a hastily painted sign which said: PEOPLE'S PIT – KEEP OUT. The Bont lodge banner had been erected in front of the canteen.⁹⁰

The novel ends however not with a positive challenge to the discourse of defeat suggested by this declaration of an alternative new order but with complete capitulation to it. In a somewhat overwrought conclusion Glynmor's last stand against the establishment ends in the apocalyptic vision of a police helicopter hovering over his redoubt on the mound of the pit whipping up a storm of coal dust against a backdrop of hymns being sung by fundamentalist Welsh Christians:

There was lament and heartbreak in the man's voice as he cried out to his people to awake and turn back to the one true and living God. A wilderness of confusion and pain rolled around Glynmor's heart and he looked up at Maggie's face on the Valley slope. She was still looking down on him but, by now, the sun had gone so black they could not see one another at all.⁹¹

It is hard to avoid the feeling with both Williams' and Davies' novels that there is an element of opportunism in the way they use the strike as

⁸⁹ Tom Davies *Black Sunlight* (MacDonald, 1986)

⁹⁰ *Ibid* p493

⁹¹ *Ibid* p494

context. Both of the novels were clearly started well before the strike began and have narrative trajectories that could have coherence without the inclusion of that particular dispute. In fact, in the case of *Black Sunlight*, the use of the strike as context actually seems to unbalance the structure of the novel as it developed – Glynmor Jones' conversion from waster and blackguard to strike hero is not at all convincing and the portrait of Huw, the disabled son, as a sort of strike mascot, idiot savant and Jesus figure is, frankly, embarrassing.

The strike as an almost forgotten secret or hidden past is a key plot device in Barry Hines' *The Heart of It*⁹², which has as its central concern a generational clash of attitudes between a father raised within the 'old' values of the Left – a communist, trade unionist and ex-miner – and his son who has left the community and adopted the neoliberal values of Thatcherism. Cal, the son, returns to the parental home to be with his father following the latter's disabling stroke and what he assumed would be a flying visit turns into a more pressing examination of his own values and assumptions about his father and what he stood for. The trigger for the rapprochement between father and son is the unravelling of an incident in the miners strike when his father organises an orderly return to work ensuring that the pride and dignity of the striking miners is protected. At the same time as he uncovers this previously unknown aspect of his father's past, Cal also learns of his mother's wartime romance with an Italian prisoner of war and his father's quiet loyalty to his mother despite his knowledge of the passionate relationship. Hines sets the dignity and community values inherent in his father in contrast to Cal's own shallow sense of (or rather his lack of) commitment and his cavalier approach to personal relationships. Here again we see the strike being used as a cipher for the loss of those values which were an integral part of his father's world and which were characterised by the humanity, unselfishness and communality of his political and trade union commitments and their replacement with the corrosive effect of a selfish and self-regarding neoliberal alternative.

Philip Hensher's novel *The Northern Clemency*⁹³ is a good example of the way in which the strike can be used to enhance the sense of time, place and period detail in what is essentially a novel exploring the nature of suburban and social aspiration. As Nick Howard has noted, Hensher's aim is to 'emulate the classic family sagas of the 1930s'⁹⁴ and in doing this his focus is very much on the way in which Thatcherism and the values of the emerging neoliberal consensus shaped the lives and destinies of middle class families in a Sheffield suburb. In this world the miners' strike happens very much as an alien event in the outside world – as an event to be observed and described, sometimes, as with his description of the Battle of Orgreave⁹⁵, in almost

⁹² Barry Hines *The Heart of It* (Michael Joseph, 1994)

⁹³ Philip Hensher *The Northern Clemency* (Fourth Estate 2008)

⁹⁴ Nick Howard <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=10399>

forensic detail. However, it is also clear that Hensher wants to stand above the fray; his book pokes gentle ridicule at suburban attitudes and at dilettante middle class involvement with the strike and, at the same time, he condemns the miners, their leadership and the conduct of the strike. His approach however is not to look at history as a collective or social experience but to see it as something experienced at an individual level, a series of personal individual pathways that are interrupted by and sometimes knocked off course by events like the strike. Katy Shaw notes that 'this decision to focus on the individual as a means of exploring the political forms an important part of the novel's approach to the past.'⁹⁶ As a result the novel does not address itself to the strike, the causes of the strike or the experiences of those taking part in it. Instead the dispute is played out through the filter of individuals who are touched by it in many different ways but who, ultimately, cannot identify or immerse themselves in it because they essentially do not belong to that world. Ultimately, like Hensher himself, his characters are voyeurs who want to engage but can't – unconsciously echoing Margaret Thatcher's statement that 'there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.'⁹⁷ What Hensher has written is a novel that makes use of the texture and flavour of the strike to add both historical verity and allegorical power to his central theme of a society becoming increasingly fragmented and individualised. However, as a result his treatment of the dispute is almost inevitably only two dimensional because he has little interest in engaging with many complex ways the strike was actually lived-out by those taking part. He relies exclusively on the discourse of defeat to provide the hinterland to his story, based on the (almost certainly true) assumption that this will be the narrative that is understood by the reader.

The use of the strike to 'dress' the background of a novel also finds its way into detective and thriller fiction. Denise Mina uses the days before the start of the dispute in which to set her novel *The Dead Hour*⁹⁸ because it provides her with a backdrop of conflict she feels is a necessary aid to the shaping of her story:

"I've tried to place each book just before a giant conflict....This is just before the miners' strike, so it's February and they're stockpiling coal and the government is refusing to meet members of the union."⁹⁹

Writing in a very similar vein, Val McDermid's *A Darker Domain*¹⁰⁰ deals with a murder cold case that has its roots in the 1984/5 miners strike and revolves around the disappearance of a miner who had been assumed to be a scab worker who moved away from his home town. The strike appears here simply as a device to enable the author to build a complex murder mystery

⁹⁶ Katy Shaw *Mining the Meaning* p153

⁹⁷ The full text of Margaret Thatcher's comments can be found on <http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/106689>

⁹⁸ Denise Mina *The Dead Hour* (Bantam, 2006)

⁹⁹ <http://markfisher.theatrescotland.com/Writer/Articles/denisemina.html>

¹⁰⁰ Val MacDermid *A Darker Domain* (Harper Collins, 2008)

rooted in a specific historical moment and does not try to engage at all with the nature of the dispute or its conduct.

Within the thriller format, a seemingly more substantial attempt to engage with the strike is William O'Rourke's *Notts*,¹⁰¹ a story of a rather hapless American academic, Michael O'Dwyer, finding himself embroiled in both the miners strike and an extended MI6 anti-terrorist operation. Katy Shaw notes that O'Rourke 'rejects a clear linear narrative in favour of an extra-literary structure based around a retrospective five-section police enquiry into a series of IRA executions'.¹⁰² However it is not the relative complexity of the structure that holds the readers interest but the way O'Dwyer is manipulated and bundled towards his tragic end in a way that can be taken to parallel the path of the strike itself. The decision to set the action at a moment when the strike is drawing to it's conclusion and within a strike community where a fatalistic gloom permeates everything, simply acts to emphasise the importance the author gives to the discourse of total defeat. Setting the action in the Nottingham coal field where the strike was notoriously contested and where the opposition to the NUM solidified into the Government sponsored alternative union, The Union of Democratic Mineworkers, serves to act as a comment on the inevitable futility of the strike. In particular O'Rourke uses incidents from the real strike – the absence of a national ballot and the accidental killing of a taxi driver – to allow his striking miners to confess their shortcomings:

O'Rourke's text vividly reanimates this tragedy to inscribe a wider monologic critique of the miners' strike as a doomed and misguided adventure: "It was a mistake', Brian says into the silence. Michael supposes he is still referring to the taxi driver, though it might be to any number of things."¹⁰³

However, at no point does the strike really take central stage – this is a novel about confused identity and about the way reality ties Michael O'Dwyer in knots (*Notts*). Before finding himself on a two day tour of the Nottingham picket-lines O'Dwyer is heading to a Conference at the university where he is giving a paper on George Orwell's *1984*. He describes himself as 'a Professor of stereotypes' giving a paper on Old Speak : 'The things that are said most often, in most instances, by most people, and, most important, in the same way, with the same words, mostly.'¹⁰⁴ And, of course ironically, he could be describing the way in which the hegemonic discourse of defeat for the miners has prevailed in the public sphere. As I have suggested already, this is not in fact a novel about the miners' strike at all but a novel that uses the shadow of the miners' strike to create a cover and mood for a story of alienation, social voyeurism (ultimately both Michael and his companion Jessie can only

¹⁰¹ William O'Rourke *Notts* (Marlow & Co., 1996)

¹⁰² Katy Shaw *Mining the Meaning* p147

¹⁰³ Ibid p156

¹⁰⁴ William O'Rourke *Notts* p6

observe the miners and are unable to be part of their world just as they can only ever be victims of the world of the terrorist) and confused identity.

The strike also makes an appearance in novels aimed at the teenage market where it is used as a convenient dramatic device allowing the authors to explore personal and private dramas that highlight the developmental conflicts at the heart of growing up and confronting the adult world. At least two of the books under examination here illustrate the way the authors seek to use the strike to provide their readers with what might be called 'life lessons' about the nature of conflict and the way the adult world deals with these events. Andrew Taylor's *The Coal House*¹⁰⁵ tells the story of Alison, a thirteen year old girl who is forced to relocate to a new house following the death of her mother. The house had previously belonged to a pit owners family in Victorian times and now holds spectral and mysterious echoes of the past which Alison confronts with the help of her father and her new friend Tommy, whose father is a striking miner. The strike provides a dramatic backcloth for the main action and is presented almost exclusively through the lens of violent conflict – the picket line versus the police and the injustice of the police tactics in dealing with Tommy's dad. Alison's desire to support her new friend and the striking miners is used as a way of highlighting her immaturity and vulnerability and is set against her father's more circumspect approach:

Ally, think it through. There are no end of arguments on both sides of the pit strike. Think them through and decide for yourself by all means. But don't suddenly pin your colours to the local flag just because you've decided to settle down.....When all's said and done, neither of us really could say who's right and who's wrong.¹⁰⁶

Taylor provides his readers with a formula – this wasn't your fight so don't rush to judgement because of an emotional response to perceived injustice - that is picked up by Bel Mooney in her novel *A Flower of Jet*¹⁰⁷ which offers a somewhat more complex version of the idea that there might be right on both sides of the dispute. Mooney sets out to show that it was not only the miners and their families who supported the strike that were transformed by it but the miners and their families who broke the strike and kept working or returned to work before the strike officially ended.¹⁰⁸ At first

¹⁰⁵ Andrew Taylor *The Coal House* (Collins, 1986)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid p94

¹⁰⁷ Bel Mooney *A Flower of Jet* (Hamish Hamilton, 1990)

¹⁰⁸ There are no official reliable figures for the number of miners who broke the strike either by refusing to come out without a national ballot or by drifting back to work before the strike was called off by the NUM. Seamus Milne's study of the government's tactics demonstrate clearly that the figures they released for the number of working miners was largely fictitious and the NUM by and large refused to recognise any miners working outside the Nottingham pits until the drift back to work at the end of 1984 became undeniable.

this might seem to be evidence that the discourse of total defeat is being challenged by a more subtle take on the notion of the transformational power of the dispute but this turns out not to be the case. Mooney is, in fact, more interested in creating a Romeo and Juliet scenario which enables her to effectively say two things – love is not a slave to the artificial barriers of conflict created by adults and history, and, young people who are untainted by conflictual adult concerns are able to see the values that are really important. Ultimately, the romance between the strike leader's daughter, Melanie, and the scab's son, Tom, is resolved by the ending of the strike and Mooney's capitulation to the discourse of defeat:

‘I wouldn't mind', said Mrs Wall, 'but we've got nothing out of it. They haven't got any agreement not to close pits. They've got nothing for us. And after all we've been through.' That refrain was repeated again and again, as newspapers wrote encouraging the people in the mining communities to forgive, forget and go back to work. But it wasn't easy.¹⁰⁹

The book concludes with Melanie's claim that the strike will never be forgotten but accepting Tom's view that now at least 'there's no sides any more – not as far as we're concerned.'¹¹⁰

However, it is in a novel aimed at teenagers that we get the closest to a clear challenge to the orthodox discourse of total defeat. Gwen Grant's *The Revolutionary's Daughter*¹¹¹ is essentially a story of the anguish felt by a teenage girl – Violette – over the break-up of her family and the destruction of her otherwise orderly life. The trigger for Violette's misery is her mother's involvement in and commitment to supporting the miners' strike. As well as dealing with difficult teenage transition, Grant is most interested in exploring the gender issues at the heart of the mother daughter relationship:

‘Violette, please. Please,' Janis pleaded. 'Try and see me in my own right – as a woman. I am a *woman*, 'she insisted. 'I didn't spring from the womb with "Mother" tattooed on my forehead...I'm *me* now and I'm going to keep on being me.'¹¹²

Grant draws a portrait of a family changed forever by the impact of the strike on Janis, Violette's mother. The lazy and complacent men in the family – husband and son – are not just domestically disinterested, they are politically disinterested and from the outset dismiss Janis's outrage at the treatment of the miners, 'This is nothing to do with you. It's not your fight. Let them sort it out between them..' ¹¹³Janis's decision to ignore her husband moves her into the orbit of people with very different views and ultimately

¹⁰⁹ Ibid p142

¹¹⁰ Ibid p153

¹¹¹ Gwen Grant *The Revolutionary's Daughter* (Heinemann, 1990)

¹¹² Ibid pp110-111

¹¹³ Ibid p5

Violette too comes to see that there is a very different way of looking at her life and her future as a woman. The key moment in Violette's journey to understand comes about following the release of her mother from police arrest during which time she has been strip-searched. Seeing what her mother was prepared to go through, Violette begins to adjust her own sense of personal identity – 'I'm not the actress's daughter, I'm the Revolutionary's daughter'.¹¹⁴

Although the transformational moment in this book relates most powerfully to the changed relationship between mother and daughter, implicit in this is the transformational power of the strike itself – although the book does not go on to explore this idea directly.

The strike in fiction : hymns to the discourse of defeat

So far this study has explored those novels which use the 84-85 miner's strike as an event that confers historical legitimacy or social context on stories that do not seek to examine the nature of the strike, its conduct or consequences because those things are, of themselves, important and interesting but because they add texture and provide meaning to other central themes the novelist wishes to explore. I now want to turn to three novels which I believe seek to address the strike itself as an important historical event.

The idea that novels relating to the Miners' Strike are effectively trapped inside a hegemonic discourse of defeat that relies for its power on the effectiveness of myth can best be explored through a more detailed look at what is probably the most important work of fiction that has been written about the dispute, David Peace's *GB84*¹¹⁵. Peace has been unequivocal about his view that the strike represented an historical moment in which society changed fundamentally for the worst. As a result of this he is unwilling or unable to acknowledge that any discourse other than that of total defeat is possible or intellectually legitimate. In conversation with Marquesse,¹¹⁶ Peace acknowledges that there were 'positive things that happened in the strike that are missing from the book'¹¹⁷ and that he omits them because their inclusion would represent 'a kind of socialist revisionism'¹¹⁸. He concludes his interview with the categorical assertion that:

¹¹⁴ Ibid pp154-155

¹¹⁵ David Peace *GB84* (Faber and Faber , 2004)

¹¹⁶ Mike Marquesse, [2009] 'No redemption' Red Pepper (<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/No-redemption/>) (2011) [accessed 16.5.11]

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p1

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p1

The strike ended with the defeat of organised labour and the defeat of socialism [...]. I don't want the book to offer a sense of redemption because as a country we haven't got it. And we don't deserve it¹¹⁹.

Peace subscribes to what might be called the 'end of history' argument advanced by economic philosophers such as Francis Fukuyama¹²⁰ and he holds this position despite substantive evidence to the contrary – neither organised labour nor socialism were 'defeated' by the outcome of the Miners' Strike. The strike clearly was an important moment in British social history but not just because of the impact the dispute had on a powerful industrial trade union but also because of the lessons learned from the positive aspects of the strike that Peace refuses to engage with.

Peace describes his novel as an 'occult' fiction¹²¹, an attribution that encourages the reader to see the events of the strike as both fundamentally murky and obscure and at the same time driven by malign or even demonic forces. The ambiguity of the word 'occult' – suggestive simultaneously of secrecy and the supernatural – is in many ways the key to this novel. For whilst it is ostensibly a "fiction based on [the] fact" of the Miner's Strike,¹²² it is important to note that this is not a novel about trade unionism, industrial strife or the future of the coal industry and the jobs associated with it. Using the miners' dispute as a vehicle, Peace is more concerned with the idea of myth and the way critical moments in history can be interpreted through the vehicle of mythology.

As a novelist Peace is clearly interested in reimagining and reconstructing the past – whether that is post war Tokyo or 1970s Yorkshire. *GB84* also belongs to this body of reconstructionist history and the title directly references George Orwell and the Right-wing paramilitary organisation GB75, a collection of disillusioned army officers, spies and ex-civil servants who worked covertly to undermine the Labour government and the trade unions. Peace, in an interview with the BBC, explained the origins of the title:

It's called *GB84* because there was an organisation called GB75 which, in 1975, was set up by Far Right and secret service and army officers who were disillusioned with the way society was being run. GB84 kind of gives a flavour, because those self-same right-wing elements were still involved in undermining the trade unions during that time.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p2

¹²⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man* (London : Penguin, 1993)

¹²¹ Matthew Hart, 'The Third English Civil War: David Peace's "Occult History" of Thatcherism' *Contemporary Literature* 4, 49 (2008) 573 – 596 p573

¹²² Ibid., p573

Rhona Gordon notes that 'both Orwell's novel and GB75 are concerned with the same issues of surveillance and right wing violence which set the tone of *GB84*¹²³ Peace's own memories of the strike are themselves revealing (and perhaps understandably adolescent given that he was only 17 years old when the strike began). In an interview with *The Socialist Worker* he acknowledged that:

By the end of the strike, to my shame, I remember wishing it would just go away. But later when I was writing the four books that form the Red Riding Quartet and remembering the time and place I grew up in, I knew the strike was a big part of that.¹²⁴

It can be argued that Peace's guilt about his wish to see the strike just 'go away' begins to account for why he finds it so hard to engage with the positive aspects of the strike. Although he wants, at one level, to acknowledge the complexity of the dispute as it affects individuals and communities he finds it easier to look for the big picture and to ascribe the blame for what happened to forces beyond our control. If organized labour was defeated, he seems to say, it is because there were forces, perhaps even supernatural, mythological or malign forces, pushing towards some kind of inevitable outcome. The final words of the novel echo this sense impending catastrophe: "Awake! Awake! This is England, Your England – and the Year is Zero."¹²⁵

Given Peace's view that the defeat of the miners marked the end of 'organised labour' and 'socialism' and that from this position there could be no redemption, this conclusion is, at the least, ambiguous. He is clearly making reference again to Orwell and his essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn : Socialism and the English Genius Part 1 : England Your England'¹²⁶, which explores the threat of fascism to 'English civilisation'¹²⁷ and to Blake's poem 'Jerusalem' (1804-1820), a mythological reworking of the fall and redemption of Albion, which contains an entreaty to the English that they should awake from their slumbers – both temporal and spiritual: "Awake! awake O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! expand!"¹²⁸ By conjuring up the voices of these two great

¹²³ Rhona Gordon "A Scar Across The Country": Representations of the Miners' Strike in David Peace's *GB84*

¹²⁴ No author, 'David Peace Interview : GB84's shadowy forces ranged against the miners' Socialist Worker on-line (<http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=17311>) (2010)

[accessed 20.9.10]

¹²⁵ Peace(2004), p462

¹²⁶ George Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn' in *The collected essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell Volume 2* ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London : Secker & Warburg, 1968)

¹²⁷ Ibid., p57

¹²⁸ William Blake, *Complete Prose and Poetry of William Blake*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (London : Nonsuch Press, 1989) p434

English authors who, from their different historical perspectives, embody a kind of progressive nationalism, Peace seeks to alert the reader to the danger he believes is inherent in the attack on the values of the British people he sees represented by the strike. More darkly he seems to hint at a future of totalitarian brutality by the adoption of the term 'Year Zero' – a post-revolutionary policy of the Pol Pot regime which slaughtered millions in the killing fields of Cambodia. However, we have to ask why he is issuing this warning? If the defeat was so conclusive and so irrevocable (remembering that the novel has been written some fifteen years after the events it reputedly describes) who is meant to wake up and to what?

What the book's ending does show is that Peace is clearly conflicted about the strike and its meaning. At one level he wants to say that the game is up and that the defeat of the miners represented, forever, the end of progressive politics and the kind of communitarianism represented by the trade union movement and yet he cannot quite let go of the idea that he, the writer oracle, can in some way wake us from our slumbers and reanimate our 'English' spirit of radicalism and decency – although quite what miners in Scotland and Wales would make of this Englishness is unclear.

This duality runs like a seam throughout the book. Although *GB84* is primarily concerned with the state of the nation, Peace's presentation of trade unionism and of individual trade union members shapes the novel. The National Union of Mineworkers [NUM] is represented as an organisation operating at two different but related levels – the activist and the political. The structure of the book itself reflects these different aspects of the NUM with the 'diaries' of two of the striking miners – Martin and Peter – always set away from the main narrative, in double columns on the verso page, punctuating the main plot and starting each new chapter. Newspaper interviews at the time of publication suggest that Peace did this as a form of tribute to the individual miners who he wanted to separate from the chaotic and unpleasant world depicted in the main plot. Mike Marquesee in *The Independent* reports his conversation with Peace in these terms:

Peace anchors this main narrative – with its ellipses and ambiguities – to a concrete, day-by-day chronicle of the strike as seen through the eyes and told in the language of two Yorkshire miners. Each chapter begins with a solid block of unbroken prose in which their experiences are re-created with blunt immediacy. 'The miners' narratives are not fictionalised,' Peace says. 'They are actually the truth.' [...] For all its horror, the book is infused with a sense of dignity

of the strike and the strikers. 'I hadn't appreciated the degree of their sacrifice and selflessness'.¹²⁹

However, despite Peace's claim that the miners are speaking in their own words, the lives of Martin and Peter remain essentially two dimensional – they exist only within the confines of their identity as striking miners rather than as human beings. The claim that the daily diaries of Peter and Martin have authenticity does not, of course, mean that they should be read as the thoughts and actions of unique individuals – it is clear that Peace wants them, in some sense, to stand for a certain type of miner: one committed to the values of family and community as much as they are to their friends and workmates in the union. There is a world of honour and adherence to the values of loyalty and solidarity. However, from the outset of the novel they are embroiled in friction and emotional violence. Martin's wife, Cath, captures the sense of foreboding that surrounds the start of the strike: 'Cath wipes her face. Cath dries her eyes. Cath looks at television. Cath says, She hates us.'¹³⁰ Her understanding that, for the Prime Minister and the Government, this is a personal fight helps to build an atmosphere of tetchiness and mistrust between Martin and Cath and makes tangible the overweening atmosphere of gloom that permeates both Martin and Peter's diaries for most of the time.

To reinforce the sense of inevitability that pervades the opening of the novel, Peace introduces, from the outset, the 'voices' of the dead from past civil wars which have a ghostly or spectral commentary of their own and seem to be an augury of troubles ahead: '*The dead brood under Britain. We whisper. We echo. The emanation of Giant Albion* – '¹³¹ The clear reference again to the prophetic poetry of Blake and the later images of warfare, and civil war in particular, thrust themselves into the text of the striking miners' diaries. The sense that this is another English Civil War being fought between the State and the miners is constantly emphasised:

Telephone wakes me up about two. Day 205. Incoming calls only [...] It's Keith. *Click click*. He says, There's thousands of police at pit. Fucking thousands. *Krk-krk*. Thousands? I say. Joking with us. I wish I were, he says. Know what it fucking means and all don't you? Means fucking war, that's what it means.¹³²

Throughout the miners' diaries Peace provides the ominous sound-effects of the 'click click' of the phone tap and the 'Krk-krk' of the marching boots, batons and riot shields of the police. In this way he emphasizes the paramilitary credentials of the police, their equipment and their ability to call

¹²⁹ Mike Marquese, 'David Peace : State of the Union Rights' Independent newspaper online (2010) (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/david-peace-state-of-the-union-rights-572067.html>) [accessed 1.6.10], p2

¹³⁰ Peace (2004) p10

¹³¹ Ibid., p2

¹³² Ibid., p256

on a degree of sophisticated technological back-up in support of their tactics. This is not an fair fight – practically or morally. The miners not only face a civil police force acting as an army but a whole range of agents provocateur, by and large invisible to the striking miners and willing to do literally anything to undermine and destabilize the strike.

Peace's portrait of the NUM as a political force focuses on the activities of The President and the senior officers of the union. In contrast to the very fractured, chaotic, action-led story of the strike presented through the picketing miners' diaries, the story of the senior negotiating officials is claustrophobic and riddled with paranoia, displays of seemingly arbitrary power and constantly shifting political allegiances. If Martin and Peter are the foot-soldiers of the war, the NUM Headquarters is the command centre. As the novel progresses and it is clear that victory in the strike is getting more and more remote, the atmosphere in the Headquarters building becomes increasingly oppressive and airless. In a further echo of wartime imagery, there is an undeniable sense that the union headquarters has become the President's equivalent of Hitler's bunker:

The President caught between the rocks of the Right and the hard places of the Left. Cornered and trapped, he lived behind locked doors. He spoke in secret and talked on tape. Taped all transmissions, recorded all reports. Joan cooked his food. Len tested it. The President ate only small amounts, staggered in stages. He drank only boiled water. The president left the locked doors of his office only for rallies.
133

At the end of the novel Peace presents us with a world in transition. But it is a transition into a dark and terrifying future. On both sides of this war there are losses: for the trade union movement and for the forces of the status quo. The Secret Services, who are mobilised against the miners, have their values and *modus operandi* fundamentally challenged and ultimately swept away as absolutely as the values of trade unionism and collective action. This is a world that will be inherited by a Government that is peopled by a new set of ideologues that have no truck with old expressions of honour or loyalty:

Until that Day of Judgement – There will be no spring. There can be no morning – There will only be winter. There can only be night....The Armies of the Right – we are here because of you they say.....Here where she stands at the gates at the head of her tribe and waits – Triumphant on the mountains of our skulls. Up to her hems in the rivers of our blood. 134

Peace portrays the 1984/5 Miners' Strike as an event that transcends the everyday politics of industrial relations and becomes an almost visionary glimpse into a future dominated by fear and loathing. He presents the strike

¹³³ Ibid., p352

¹³⁴ Ibid., p426

as a mythological battleground on which the forces of good and evil are engaged in a struggle for our collective future. The fact that, for Peace, evil is triumphant leaves the reader bereft of hope. However, even given the context of the dominant discourse within which his interpretation is located, Peace's history of the Miners' Strike is a personal, even idiosyncratic, interpretation of events and not, as he and many critics have sought to claim, the definitive one. His deterministic and apocalyptic reading of the strike is one which willingly embraces the idea of absolute defeat – not just for the miners and socialism but, he seems to be saying, those values of 'Britishness' that have been fought for down the ages.

Peace believes that the outcome of the strike has bequeathed him a present and future with, as he sees it, no hope of redemption, but the novels of Roger Granelli¹³⁵ and Martyn Waites¹³⁶ provide a very different perspective on the same discourse. Although they approach their retelling of the strike from a very different direction, the clash of ideologies that they see being played out in the strike has the same result – ultimate defeat, not just for the trade union but for the striking miners as individuals. However, for these authors their concerns are less visionary and very much more domestic with centre of interest being focused on the destructive impact of the strike on family relationships and on notions of community.

Unlike Peace who is concerned with portraying the strike as a war between ideologies which was fought out in public space, Granelli's *Dark Edge* makes the clash of ideologies a very much more personal and domestic battleground. Granelli adopts a very deliberately social realist narrative structure for his novel which stands in contrast to Peace's use of a more experimental format and it is clear his intension is very different to that of Peace and is much more akin to the creation of a modern day morality tale. The device of placing two brothers with contrasting characteristics and values in conflict has, of course, a long heritage that allows the author the opportunity to paint those characters in very broad brush-strokes – which is something Granelli certainly takes advantage of.

The book tells the story of Edwin, the striking miner and Elliott, his brother, who is a member of the police force and deeply committed to humiliating the miners and undermining their action. From the beginning we are left in no doubt about Elliott's political sympathies:

"Elliott read the banner headline of the morning newspaper. It said that miners were striking at the heart of democracy in a statement by Margaret Thatcher. Elliott agreed with it, he supported all the prime minister's utterances...Thatcher had shown him the way forward. Opportunities were there to be grasped, if one had the bottle. Like him, she had no time for losers." ¹³⁷[p18]

¹³⁵ Roger Granelli *Dark Edge* (Seren, 1997)

¹³⁶ Martyn Waites *Born Under Punches* (Pocket Books 2003)

¹³⁷ Granelli p18

Elliott is, like the ideology that unleashed him, brutal and ultimately destructive. His fanaticism marks him out even from his colleagues and he is, early in the novel, driven by a lust for blood and violence. Granelli describes how he would seek out violent confrontation and how this produces 'an exciting glaze to his face ... his breath came in short, exhilarated bursts'.¹³⁸

Elliott's violence in the public sphere is mirrored by his violence in his private life. His regular affairs with other women have left him alienated from his wife, Susan, who he treats as property and his attempts to be a decent family man and father always fall short. But Elliott's betrayals breed betrayal of him by others. The focus of his infidelity, Lisa, is in the process of leaving him for another man she herself thinks she will be able to exploit. Elliott, Granelli is telling us, is the inevitable outcome of Thatcherism – self-regarding, ruthless, violent and unable to build or hold relationships.

If Elliott represents the violent, unstable world offered by Thatcherism, Edwin represents a world of tradition and of old values inherited from a better past. Granelli establishes the contrast very early and with the same broad-brush:

But Edwin still believed in his birthplace and its old ideals, no matter how beleaguered it had become. His socialism was a fundamental part of him, as vital as his heart and lungs, and was not for turning.¹³⁹ [p14]

But Edwin – and here he seems to speak for the author - knows that the world he stands for is 'out of date'¹⁴⁰ and that he will not be able to stand against change. Unlike Elliott who is depicted as a man out of place and out of sympathy with his past and his environment, Edwin is an organic part of the landscape and the community. Edwin's value to the NUM is constantly underscored by the role he plays in relation to the strike action. He is, sometimes against his real instincts, constantly upbeat about the action and about the way the action is proceeding. In stark contrast to the embattled and downbeat tone of Martin and Peter, the miners in Peace's novel, Edwin is humorous, reasonable and controlled. Even when he is in a car that is stopped by the police, vandalised and turned back, it is Edwin who counsels caution.

Through the brothers in conflict, Granelli shows us the inherent contradiction of a world in transition - it isn't possible to win the strike by relying on the old fashioned virtues Edwin represents but, equally, it is unthinkable to inhabit Elliott's corrupt world-view. Edwin has to be taken on a journey of political and personal self-discovery before the action of the novel can be resolved and it is at this point we begin to see some elements of the discourse of transformation struggling to emerge. Granelli brings Edwin, a

¹³⁸ Ibid p11

¹³⁹ Ibid p14

¹⁴⁰ Ibid p16

man of very traditional views, into direct contact with the emerging women's support groups but unlike the misogyny that characterises Elliott, Edwin finds the discovery of strong, independent women both surprising and positive. He meets up with the organising spirit behind the women's groups, Rita Jenkins, early in the novel:

"This is taking off, Ed,' Rita said, 'I've got twenty girls collecting now...Edwin let her reel off the list, it was the nearest Rita would ever get to showing off and he wanted her to enjoy it."¹⁴¹

Unlike the women in *GB84*, Granelli uses the critical mass of these support groups to illustrate the way in which the strike generated good, positive energy within communities. Not only were they the practical response to the problems of the strike, they also become the moral and ethical heart of the union. Edwin's world is also shaken by his encounter with Katheryn Peters, journalist, academic and feminist who comes into the community to report on the strike. Initially, she sees Edwin and his world as a back-water, a place belonging to the past, 'a world that was archaic and restrictive to her own sex'¹⁴² But Katheryn is drawn into the community of the strike and comes to appreciate, albeit through her middle-class sensibilities, just what the dispute is about and why the miners are able to sustain the dispute against seemingly impossible odds. Edwin is forced to accommodate the positive influence of the women supporters of the strike and he is also forced to confront the fact that he and his colleagues were being repeatedly let down by the wider trade union movement. Edwin comes from a tradition of unionism that put its faith in bureaucratic structures and formal chains of command and when these begin to fail Edwin is forced to acknowledge that his adherence to these old values has already made him irrelevant:

"[Edwin]Bowles was not playing to their game plan now, he was a liability and would have to be jettisoned."¹⁴³

The ultimate showdown between Elliott and Edwin is a melodramatic and rather clumsy metaphor for a clash of ideologies. Elliott, representing the new greedy, selfish and cruel world of Thatcherism and Edwin, standing for the old values of community and fellowship but not afraid to embrace change in a changing world. In an unconvincing fight between the two of them on a bridge Elliott falls and ends the book as a paraplegic trapped inside the confines of his inadequate body. Edwin, however, is also damaged and feels that he cannot any longer be part of the community he has fought so hard to save and so he resolves to leave in order to develop as an individual.

Granelli's flirtation with the discourse of transformation comes to an abrupt halt with the decision to make Edwin leave the community he had grown up in despite the evidence of change and the promise of community

¹⁴¹ Ibid p52

¹⁴² Ibid p114

¹⁴³ Ibid p164

renewal inherent in the work of the women's support groups. Underlying Granelli's morality tale there remains an assumption of defeat not just for the miners but for a whole way of life and a whole set of communitarian values

Both *GB84* and *Dark Edge* deal with the strike in what might be called 'real time'. Martyn Waites, by contrast, sets his novel, *Born Under Punches* both at the time of the strike and also twenty years later. At the heart of this novel is Stephen Larkin, a fledgling journalist at the time the strike begins, who finds the experience and the lessons of that period impossible to forget and something he feels compelled to revisit years later. Like *GB84* and *Dark Edge* this novel is also centrally concerned with the way in which the strike represented a key moment in social history – a time when everything changed. However, unlike the other books that have been looked in this section, *Born Under Punches* does not place miners or their trade union officials themselves at the heart of the action – instead we are given a picture of what happens to a community and its residents when they are exposed to the brutalisation of the neoliberal economic reality. Waites' collection of damaged and brutal characters play out their lives in the shadow of this strike and what this strike came to represent. In the same way that Peace strikes an apocalyptic note in *GB84*, Waites has his central character, the young Larkin (the character's name selected perhaps for its echoes of the poet Philip Larkin whose words provide the book's opening statement), recognise the defining moment of what for him will become the modern age:

The modern age as we know it, began on Monday 28th 1984. This is not a date plucked at random for its Orwellian connotations, nor is it an officially recognised one. Yet it was on this day that our country changed forever, the time bomb was primed, the countdown began. And where did this singular event occur? Orgreave coke works outside Rotherham, South Yorkshire.¹⁴⁴

Waites does not, however, spend a great deal of time on the miners themselves and the representations of the strikers and their trade union are largely two dimensional and focus heavily on the violence of the picket lines. As if to prefigure the inevitable defeat of the strike, his miners are reluctant activists, volatile and always on the edge of defeatism or rebellion. The novel uses the character of Mick Hutton to represent the views of the 'ordinary' striking miners, who are presented as men caught in a moment of history that is beyond their control – perhaps even beyond their understanding;

They drank with stoic intensity from mugs of tea and fugged the room up with cigarette smoke, using it as a smokescreen to hide their fear from each other. These were hard men, solid men. Scared men.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Ibid p25

¹⁴⁵ Ibid p79

Mick is the image of 'how they feared they really were'¹⁴⁶ – essentially ordinary men with ordinary aspirations unlike the inspirational union organiser Dougie or the 'extremely angry'¹⁴⁷ left-wing firebrand Dean Plessey. In many ways Mick becomes an 'Everyman' figure, representing what happens to decent men who find themselves at these violent inter-sections of history. He is the foot-soldier in every war, the human casualty behind the politicians:

"There stood Mick, his face red, blue and purple, his clothes torn and soiled with dirt and blood. His body damaged and roughly bandaged. His eyes lost, defeated."¹⁴⁸

Seventeen years later when Larkin returns to Coldwell to undertake a reflective and developmental study of the town as 'a microcosm for the country as a whole'¹⁴⁹, he finds the miners he knew then have moved on but not to very positive new places. Dean Plessey has become an odious and self-serving Blairite politician while Mick Hutton's life has fallen apart and he is now an alcoholic, dependent on a local community project for support. When Larkin encounters him he sees a man with 'hair thinning and grey, face puffed and patchworked, red blotches, deep-purple broken veins. Thin body, skin gooseflesh-pallid.'¹⁵⁰ Ironically the two meet at a community goodwill football game between the police and the clients of the community project. Mick is fatalistic and without obvious rancour but deeply in denial:

Larkin nodded, looked at Mick. 'I bet you wish the pit was still here, then.?' he said. Mick's throat rattled.....'Naw. Hated the place.'...'Aye. An' all that bollocks about comrades and socialism...' He pointed in front of him, gesturing to the opposition. 'An what those bastards did an' all.'¹⁵¹

Waites' draws a picture of the miners and their community which is deeply rooted in the discourse of defeat. Individuals are living lost and shattered lives and even the town's football hero turned social worker is a hypocritical secret drug addict. The community has found some kind of apathetic reconciliation, remnants of the striking miners now play charity football games with their police antagonists while barely beneath the surface the town is still being controlled by petty gangsters whose influence was unleashed by the despair of the 1980s economic restructuring. Stephen Larkin, once an idealistic, putative campaigning journalist who once believed that telling the truth could change things, is now nothing more than a researcher and archaeologist in the lives of people who have been crushed.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid p82

¹⁴⁷ Ibid p80

¹⁴⁸ Ibid p250

¹⁴⁹ Ibid p34

¹⁵⁰ Ibid p163

¹⁵¹ Ibid pp165-166

The alternative strike experience : looking for the authentic voice

This chapter has argued that the majority of novels that have tried to reimagine and analyse in the impact of the 1984/5 miners' strike (and those that use that dispute as a back-cloth to another, primary narrative) have been written from within the confines of what I have called the discourse of total defeat. This discourse privileges the view that the strike was ultimately a disaster – for the miners and their families, for the trade union movement, for communities and even, David Peace would argue, for a major political ideology such as socialism. Despite the fact that the majority of these novels were written well after the strike had been concluded and by authors who were not, by and large, present at the time of the strike itself, they claim an authenticity of voice that is, I would contend, ultimately bogus. As Katy Shaw points out, these novels 'seize and communicate individual stories through a confusing combination of naturalism and realism, whitewashing historical ignorance with a heavy daub of imagination and hypothesis'¹⁵² and as a result they end up 'employing a historiographic mask to defend their position [and] imply that their own version of history is traditional, local, honest and truthful.'¹⁵³ The fact that, for the most part, the novelists examined here would profess a sympathy and support for the miners appears to add weight to their analysis and credence to the view that they in some way capture and articulate the views of a whole 'defeated' social class. Speaking specifically of *GB84*, Sue Owen's work tends to support Shaw's view that the claims made for the authenticity of voice are open to question and the reputation of these novels as true and even sympathetic reconstructions creates a false perspective.

The novel's (*GB84*) postmodernism, it's resistance of direct narrative strategies, or conventional character and plot actually works against it speaking on behalf of working class people. The working class may be ill-served by a rupture with realistic representation when they have found it so hard to achieve fair representation in the first place.....The press love the novel *because* the workers are deluded and tragic victims.¹⁵⁴

It is also significant that the majority of these authors are men who seem drawn to interpreting the strike through the lens of conflict and warlike metaphor. There is a battleground mentality of win or lose at play in the discourse of defeat which seems to appeal to a strand of masculine aggression which is reluctant to accept that concepts of defeat and victory are not necessarily absolute.

¹⁵² Mining the Meaning p159

¹⁵³ Ibid p160

¹⁵⁴ Sue Owen p180

The alternative to the discourse of defeat, the discourse of transformation, provides a way in which it is possible to interpret the strike in a more nuanced and multi-dimensional manner and it describes an experience which does not need validation through the lens of victory or defeat but through that of personal and collective growth and change. Significantly, this finds its most satisfying expression in the hands of women – it is, after all Gwen Grant's novel for teenagers that comes closest to finding a satisfactory expression of this transformative experience. Both Sue Owen and Katy Shaw point to the role of women's support organisations as the key to locating this transformative message and both criticise the marginalisation of the literature created by the miners and their wives and its 'revelatory uniqueness'. Owen in contrasting the way David Peace presents the women's support groups in his novel with a poem by Jean Gittins¹⁵⁵ who was herself part of such a group notes that 'there is a difference in tone, a humour, resilience and toughness in Gittins' insider's perspective'¹⁵⁶ which denies the bleakness of Peace's vision.

It is also clear that to be understood or properly appreciated the discourse of transformation relies on the voices of those directly involved in the strike being heard and valued as legitimate commentators. What also has to be acknowledged is that those voices were most often expressed in ways that were essentially ephemeral (speeches, comic sketches, hastily photocopied journalism or propaganda)¹⁵⁷ or, in the most popular format, poetry. Verse became an increasingly important way for women in particular to capture and articulate the changes that the strike was bringing to their lives. Sammy Palfrey¹⁵⁸ talks about the way in which the strike was not seen as a failure by the women in Yorkshire that she interviewed and that writing about the way they had changed was key to their experience of it. Palfrey also claims that this body of poetry 'has provided a lasting document and testimony to that struggle from the people involved, and can stand firmly beside the work of historians and journalists.'¹⁵⁹ We could add novelists to that list too.

At the heart of the discourse of transformation is the idea that the strike set in train changes in individuals, in relationships and in communities that have had, and continue to have, long term impact and serve to deny the discourse of defeat. The idea that the strike sowed important new seeds of political awareness and alternative ways of conceptualising social and economic structures can be seen in *More Valuable Than Gold*¹⁶⁰, a booklet of writing by the children of striking miners and in pamphlets such as *Women*

¹⁵⁵ Jean Gittins *Striking Stuff*

¹⁵⁶ Sue Owen p181

¹⁵⁷ See strike editions of *The Miner* for example

¹⁵⁸ Sammy Palfrey *Writing the Miner's Strike 1984-5* in *Writing on the Line*.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid* p123

¹⁶⁰ No author publication details unknown

*Living The Strike*¹⁶¹ produced by the Lothian Women's Support Group which contains the following statement:

The strike has changed every woman's life if they stop and look back at it. There might not be an awfy [sic] lot of people who turn round and say there's not any difference. But people cannae have gone through that for a year without some changes taking place.¹⁶²

In this respect the notion of 'unfinished business' is a popular metaphor to describe what Arkell and Rising call the 'enduring significance of the strike which they link indivisibly to the direct action against modern day capitalism of the sort expressed through the 'A World to Win' movement. Andrew Richards talks of the way in which the miners' strike 'pointed to..the way in which *new* communities of interest could be forged through the fierce defence of an old one'.¹⁶³

The absence of novels that pick up this theme of transformation and make it the centre of a more positive narrative of the strike and its consequences is telling. The impact of the novels that have been written and the perception that they have said everything that needs to be said about the dispute seems to act as a dead-weight on the production of fiction that explores these counter-hegemonic ideas. Shaw describes this process as one in which the novels 'entomb the strike as a finished and finalised portion of a distant historical past, effectively sealing history from further analysis, novelistic or otherwise'.¹⁶⁴ At the beginning of this section I referred to the difficulties of challenging and breaking the stranglehold of a hegemonic discourse and the way in which story-telling can play a significant role in that process or, alternatively, serve to bolster and reinforce the dominant ideas. In terms of the 1984-5 Miners' Strike it is clear that the body of fiction written by professional novelists not only reinforces the dominant establishment story of how the miners were totally defeated but also, perhaps inadvertently, also plays a part in the wider narrative about the ultimate irrelevance of trade unionism in the neoliberal age.

¹⁶¹ Lothian Women's Support Group *Living The Strike* (1986)

¹⁶² Ibid p53

¹⁶³ Richards p231

¹⁶⁴ Katy Shaw, '[Re]Writing Defeat: Poetry and the End of the Miners' Strike 1984/5' *North East History* 37 (2006) 36 - 58