

# South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c.1920-1970

Masculinity, the Lifecycle and Geography

ROBINSON, KARIANNE

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

History (School of Global Affairs)

Lancaster University

United Kingdom

## Abstract

This thesis explores miners' experiences of work and industrial change in the South Wales coalfield, c.1920-1970. At the beginning of this period, coal was mined by hand, collieries were in private hands, and the relationship between colliery management and the miners' union was tense and combative. The coal industry dominated the South Wales economy, and there were few opportunities for employment in other industries. By 1970, very little remained the same. The industry was transformed by nationalisation, technological change, and improvements in industrial relations. These developments were set against coal's shrinking position within the energy market, colliery closures and the diversification of the regional economy. Whilst the industry's transformation has been well-traced by labour, economic and political historians, little is known about men's experiences of these changes. Scholarship providing a gender-based analysis of the coalfield has tended to focus on men's experiences of being out-of-work, and not on the relationship between masculinity and work itself. This thesis uses the published autobiographies and pre-existing oral testimonies of South Wales miners to explore how their experiences of industrial change affected their perceptions of their masculinity and working identity. I also draw on a variety of other source materials – including union publications, recruitment advertisements, and government reports – to supplement and contextualise miners' personal testimonies. This thesis argues that industrial change disrupted miners' perceptions of their masculinity and working identity. It finds that geography and the lifecycle were factors that mediated both miners' experiences

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

of industrial change and their perceptions of their own identity. This thesis pushes beyond a binary understanding of work as something men either had access to or not. In doing so, it sheds new light on the significance of work as a site of identity formation and serves to complicate our understanding of working-class masculinities.

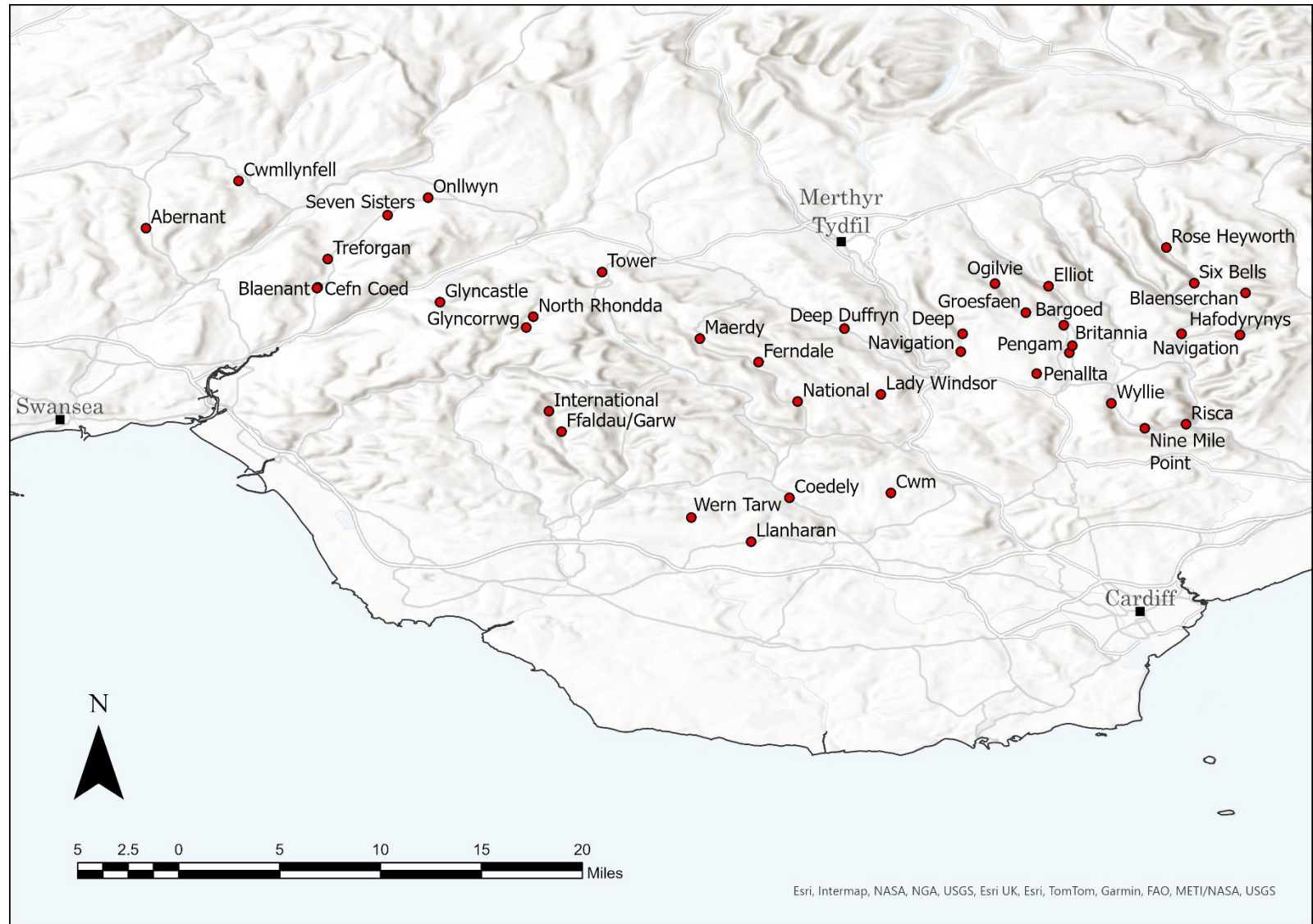
## Contents

Masculinity, the Lifecycle and Geography.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Abstract .....	ii
Abbreviations.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Author’s Declaration.....	vii
Introduction.....	8
Chapter 1 Mining Boyhood: The formation of coal miners’ masculinities and working identities. ....	39
Chapter 2 Mechanisation.....	81
Chapter 3 Nationalisation, Job Insecurity, and the Union’s Policy of Inaction .....	129
Chapter 4 Manpower Movement During the Era of Mass Pit Closures .....	184
Conclusion .....	234
Bibliography.....	251

# South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

## Map of the South Wales Coalfield

Map of the South Wales coalfield with points indicating the location of collieries mentioned in this thesis. My thanks go to Dabeoc Stanley for creating this map.



## Abbreviations

MFGB – Miners’ Federation of Great Britain

NCB – National Coal Board

NPLA – National Power Loading Agreement

NUM – National Union of Mineworkers

SWCC – South Wales Coalfield Collection

SWMF – South Wales Miners’ Federation

SWML – South Wales Miners’ Library

TUC – Trades Union Congress

## Acknowledgements

First thanks must go to my supervisors, Professor Corinna Peniston-Bird and Dr Mark Hurst. I am exceptionally grateful to have had the support of such a patient, committed and thoughtful supervisory team. Thank you for your guidance and for bearing with me during what has been an unpredictably rocky period.

Next, I would like to acknowledge the support of all of the staff at the South Wales Miners' Library in Swansea. I am grateful for all of the times you've patiently answered my many questions, and for your help with accessing so many of the source materials that are included in this thesis. Most of all, thank you for making me feel so very welcome at the library. Simon Copeland also deserves a mention for letting me stay at his house when on library visits – I am still horrified at how much it would have cost to stay in the Travelodge. Thank you also to the library staff at Lancaster University who helped me access the materials held in Special Collections and who were willing to augment the library's holdings to include so many of the books that I requested. A particular thank you to Lynsey Wood: I have fond memories of your Hist100 seminars, and it was lovely to (quite unexpectedly) chat to you again briefly when I contacted the library with a final query a couple of weeks before submitting my thesis.

There are two members of staff at the University who I could always count on to make me smile – Becky Sheppard and Dawn McCracken. Thank you for all the times you've helped me to navigate one University system or another. But, more importantly, thank you both for being so consistently lovely – it's the people that make the place.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

I am also deeply grateful for the guidance of Jonathan Haslam in navigating the challenges that have emerged over the last few years. Thank you for the work you have done with me.

During my studies, I have been lucky enough to work for a number of years as a Writing Mentor. I've worked with countless undergraduate, PGT and PGR students who were presumably under the impression that it was me who was helping them. In truth, it was the other way around. It is such a luxury to have had so much time to think about how we write – I'm grateful for every conversation. Special thanks must go to my fellow writing mentors and to Joanne Wood, FHASS Learning Developer. Joanne, every time we met you knew exactly what I needed to hear in order to keep this project moving forwards. Thank you for giving so generously of your time and expertise.

I have been lucky to meet some amazing people during the course of my studies. The community we've created here is rare and special. I'm so very grateful for the friends I've made along the way, and I would like to name them here: Sophie Merrix, Amy Stanning, Johanne Marie Skov, Alex Rome Griffin, Will Garbett and Laura Noller. Many people have read portions of this thesis in its various forms over the years, but none more frequently than Dabeoc Stanley. I have appreciated every one of our conversations about both twentieth-century mining and eighteenth-century smuggling. I can only hope those conversations have been as useful to you as they have been for me. There are two people who have been with me on this journey since we started our MAs together – Amy Smith and Meredith Guthrie. I

don't think I could have done this without your support and all the laughter. Thank you.

A special thank you also to Ellie Bolton, Kate Haywood, Bethan Archer and Emma Long for friendship that pre-dates the PhD and the encouragement you've shown me along the way.

Before I returned to university to complete my postgraduate degrees, I spent some time unpicking my family history. I suspect that had I not, I would never have become interested in the lives of British coal miners, and both my MA dissertation and PhD thesis would have been on quite different topics. To the previous generations of my family who worked in coal mines across North Wales and Staffordshire – William Shone (c. 1787-1863), Samuel Shone (c. 1817-1897), George Shone (c. 1860-1938), George Ellis (c. 1869-1945) – thank you for inspiring me. I'll single out one now-departed family member and ex-miner: Trevor Whormsley (1933-1999), my grandad and the last in my family to work underground. Grandad, I know very little about your experience of the coal industry. There's no one left to ask who might remember much about that part of your life. I sometimes wonder what you'd think of me, and I often had you in mind when writing this thesis. I think you would have liked it.

The final person I would like to thank is my wonderful husband, Marcus. I can't adequately capture in words my gratitude for your unwavering support and encouragement. Without you, there would be no thesis. I love you too.

## Author's Declaration

This thesis is the product of all my own work and research, and it does not include work done in collaboration with any other parties. No portion of this work has been submitted for the award of a higher degree or publication elsewhere.

This thesis uses footnotes in the MHRA style. MHRA recently released an updated style guide. As my references were collected before the update, this thesis remains consistent with the earlier, 3rd edition of the style guide.

In accordance with the Manual of Academic Regulations and Procedures for postgraduate research at Lancaster University, this thesis does not exceed 80,000 words.

The word count, including footnotes, is 72,598.

Date: 30 November 2025.

## Introduction

This thesis explores miners' experiences of work and industrial change in the South Wales coalfield, c. 1920-1970. At the beginning of this period the coal industry dominated the regional economy and there were few opportunities for employment outside of the mines. By 1970, both the industry and the regional economy had been transformed. Those working in the South Wales collieries during this roughly fifty-year period experienced profound changes in their day-to-day working environment. Changes within the industry included the slow replacement of hand-got production methods with machine-mining techniques, the transition of the industry from private to public ownership, and the advent of a period of greater co-operation between the miners' union and colliery management. These developments were set against the backdrop of the industry's declining fortunes, prolonged periods of job insecurity for the mining workforce, and the diversification of the regional economy. Very little that had served to characterise the South Wales coal industry in 1920 remained the same by 1970. Much is known about the transformation of the industry in this period, but much less about the impact of these developments on members of the mining workforce. This thesis explores how industrial change affected miners' perceptions of their own masculinity and working identity. It pays particular attention to the role that the lifecycle and geography (terms which will be explicated later) played in mediating these perceptions.

Historians of the British coal industry have tended to uphold work as foundational to miners' class and gender identities whilst simultaneously

rendering that work invisible within their studies. This is true of the institutional histories which have been the mainstay of historiography of the British coal industry since the conception of the field, and the more recent gender-based analyses of the South Wales coalfield. The earliest scholarship of the British coal industry – of which the works of political activists Robert Page Arnot and Ness Edwards are exemplars – was primarily concerned with placing miners' organisations at the centre of a heroic narrative of working-class struggle and progress.<sup>1</sup> Where work and working conditions were discussed, it was primarily to set the stage for an ensuing discussion of the actions and achievements of the miners' union. The scope of coalfield scholarship, and labour history more broadly, expanded in response to the development of 'history from below' as a school of thought in the 1960s and 1970s. Emerging from the work of E. P. Thompson, 'history from below' encouraged labour historians to look beyond their traditional remit of working-class institutions, leadership and bureaucracy.<sup>2</sup> Hywel Francis and David Smith's seminal work on the South Wales coalfield, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, published in 1980, was written in this vein.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, it provided a social history of the institutions created by and for the region's miners with an emphasis on mining communities and the role of the 'rank and file'.<sup>4</sup> This broader scope, however, did not lead to any greater focus

---

<sup>1</sup> R. Page Arnot, *The Miners*, 4 vols (London: George Allen Unwin, 1949; 1953; 1961; 1979) I-IV; Ness Edwards, *History of the South Wales Miners' Federation*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1938).

<sup>2</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New Edition (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Similar approaches have been adopted by historians researching other regions. See, for example Keith Gildart, *North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity, 1945-1996* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001).

on work or working conditions. Indeed, the history of the South Wales miners as written in *The Fed* is one located almost entirely outside of the mine, away from the environment in which miners spent much of their day and most of their working lives.

For many years, gender was similarly invisible within coalfield scholarship and the field of labour history more broadly. Indeed, masculinities only emerged as a subject of historical study approximately forty years ago. The initial forays into this field focused predominantly on the middle and upper classes and their associated institutions.<sup>5</sup> Studies of working-class masculinities emerged later. In 1994, Ava Barron was one of the first to note the absence of gender-based analysis from labour history, stating that despite a focus on men and their institutions, gender had 'been treated as "natural" and, therefore, [had] been invisible in our research'.<sup>6</sup> One explanatory factor for this phenomenon within the historiography of the coal industry – in Britain and elsewhere – is the homogeneously male make-up of this workforce. Karen Beckwith, in her study of the configurations of mining masculinity during the Pittston coal strike in the USA, noted that the all-male working environment 'creates a context in which "miner" and "male" become conflated, a conflation which is so deeply ingrained that it is virtually

---

<sup>5</sup> John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (London: Yale University Press, 1999); *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. by Michael Roper and John Tosh (London: Routledge, 1991); *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America 1800-1940*, ed. by J.A. Mangan and J. Walvin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Ava Barron, 'On Looking at Men: Masculinity and the Making of a Gendered Working-Class History,' in *Feminists Revision History*, ed. by Ann-Louise Shapiro (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), pp. 146-171 (p. 148).

undetectable'.<sup>7</sup> In the years since, a growing appreciation of the interaction of social structures such as class and gender has fuelled an expansion of interest in the significance of gender in areas of study which have traditionally been dominated by class-based analysis.<sup>8</sup> In the Welsh context, it was Paul O'Leary who, in 2004, called for historians to take a greater account of masculinity within their studies. Gender, he argued, could complicate the prevailing narratives of working-class community and culture and open new avenues of research into the Welsh past.<sup>9</sup> The historiography of the British coal industry now includes a small body of literature – almost all of which focuses on the South Wales coalfield – which treats miners as gendered subjects, and which sheds light on the ways in which class and gender intersected within mining communities.

Scholars today widely recognise masculinity as a relational and plural concept. Masculinity can only be understood when considered as part of a system of gender relations that includes women, femininity and other masculinities. This understanding owes much to R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity in which the culturally dominant form of masculinity present at a given time within a society is reinforced through comparison with other, non-dominant constructions.<sup>10</sup> It is also commonly understood by masculinities scholars that

---

<sup>7</sup> Karen Beckwith, 'Gender Frames and Collective Action: Configurations of Masculinity in the Pittston Coal Strike', *Politics & Society*, 29. 2 (2001), pp. 297-330 (p. 310).

<sup>8</sup> On the interaction of social structure see: R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Paul O'Leary, 'Masculine Histories: Gender and the Social History of Modern Wales', *Welsh History Review*, 22. 2 (2004), pp. 252-277 (p. 260).

<sup>10</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, pp. 76-79; Steven Thompson, "'Can You Look in the Mirror and Say, I See a Man?'" Masculinity and the Labour Movement in South Wales, c.1870-1939', in *Gender in Modern Wales: Perspectives on Masculinity and Femininity in Wales from 1750 to 2000*, ed. by Beth Jenkins, Paul O'Leary, and Stephanie Ward (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2023), pp. 91-119 (p. 93).

men's masculine identities are not fixed. Rather, men experience masculinity as an ongoing process of identity formation. Underpinning this understanding is the notion of 'doing gender'; masculinity must be continuously performed and enacted through social interactions.<sup>11</sup> What is required in the performance of masculinity is determined by the ideas of manliness which are present within a society at a given time.

In the South Wales coalfield, the system of gender relations which existed at the beginning of the twentieth century had developed in response to the economic realities of the region and the legal framework within which the coal industry operated.<sup>12</sup> Not only was the coal industry the primary employer in the region, but it had also developed into an almost homogeneously male industry as a result of the 1842 Mines and Collieries Act which prohibited women from working underground.<sup>13</sup> Women's participation in the formal economy was further restricted by the limited availability of alternative employment opportunities outside of the coal industry. Consequently, a clear division of labour developed along gendered lines within the South Wales coalfield. More specifically, a gender order emerged in which men were responsible for providing financially for themselves, their wives, and their children, whilst women were primarily responsible for maintaining the home and raising children.<sup>14</sup> In this context, the

---

<sup>11</sup> Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, 'Doing Gender', *Gender and Society*, 1. 2 (1987), pp. 125-151.

<sup>12</sup> O'Leary, 'Masculine Histories', *Welsh History Review*, pp. 265-266.

<sup>13</sup> Mines and Collieries Act, 1842 (5 & 6 Vict, c. 99) (London: George E. Eyre & Andrew Spottiswoode).

<sup>14</sup> Neil Penlington, 'Masculinity and Domesticity in 1930s South Wales: Did Unemployment Change the Domestic Division of Labour?' *Twentieth Century British History*, 21. 3 (2010), pp. 281-299.

dominant construction of masculinity in the South Wales coalfield was one premised on the ability to earn a wage through mining labour.

With some exceptions, the literature providing a gender-based analysis of the South Wales coal industry has focused on the first half of the twentieth century, particularly the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>15</sup> Attention has been drawn to this period because the economic foundation of the established gender order was repeatedly and severely disrupted by a combination of industrial disputes and industrial decline during these years. Scholars have sought to understand the implications of this disruption for miners' experiences and perceptions of masculinity, and gender relations within the coalfield. In her comparative study of South Wales and the north-east of England in the 1930s, Stephanie Ward found that young miners who experienced unemployment could find their 'pathway to manhood' disrupted by their inability to earn a family wage. The fulfilment of the breadwinner role, Ward argues, was seen as essential to the moral foundations of marriage with some couples delaying their marriage with the hopes of first achieving financial security.<sup>16</sup> Neil Penlington has also considered the impact of mass unemployment in the 1930s, looking specifically at married miners and the domestic division of labour. He argued that married men who experienced long-term unemployment found alternative means of maintaining their status as

---

<sup>15</sup> For scholarship with a different periodisation and geographical focus see, Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, *Miners' Lung: A History of Dust Disease in British Coal Mining* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 259-269; Keith Gildart, Ben Curtis, Andrew Perchard, and Grace Millar, "'Be a Miner": Constructions and Contestations of Masculinity in the British Coalfields, 1975-1983', *International Review of Social History*, 69. 2 (2024), pp. 258-284.

<sup>16</sup> Stephanie Ward, 'Drifting into Manhood and Womanhood: Courtship, Marriage and Gender Among Young Adults in South Wales and the North-East of England in the 1930s', *Welsh History Review* 26. 4 (2013), pp. 623-648.

providers for their wives and families.<sup>17</sup> This alternative interpretation and fulfilment of the breadwinner role was similarly adopted by men during the 1926 lockout. Sue Bruley, in her study of gender relations during the lockout, argues that miners were able to maintain their masculine status despite the lack of a wage through the sourcing of food and fuel for their families and communities.<sup>18</sup> Ben Curtis and Stephen Thompson have also proffered tentative and brief remarks regarding the potential for industrial disease and disablement to challenge miners' perceptions of their masculinity by removing them from the workplace and denying them the possibility of fulfilling the breadwinner role.<sup>19</sup> Collectively, this scholarship demonstrates the centrality of minework and the breadwinner role to miners' masculine identities in this period. Masculinity and working identity were so closely entwined in the coalfield that the inability to access minework posed a significant challenge to miners' perceptions of their own masculinity. This scholarship stresses the fragility of masculinity premised on the ability to earn a wage through mining labour. In the first half of the twentieth century, miners' abilities to renegotiate their understanding of what it meant to be a man in the South Wales coalfield were heavily constrained by the economic realities of the region and the narrow definition of masculinity accepted by coalfield society.

---

<sup>17</sup> Penlington, 'Masculinity and Domesticity', *Twentieth Century British History*, pp. 281-299.

<sup>18</sup> Sue Bruley, 'The Politics of Food: Gender, Family, Community and Collective Feeding in South Wales in the General Strike and Miners' Lockout of 1926', *Twentieth Century British History*, 18. 1 (2007), pp. 54-77 (pp. 76-77). See also Sue Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926: A Gender and Social History of the General Strike and Miners' Lockout in South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), pp. 41-59.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Curtis and Stephen Thompson, "'This is the Country of Premature Old Men": Ageing and Aged Miners in the South Wales Coalfield, c.1880-1947', *Cultural and Social History*, 12. 4 (2015), pp. 587-606 (pp. 594-595). For more on masculinity and industrial disease, see McIvor and Johnston, *Miners' Lung*, pp. 259-269.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Scholars providing a gender-based analysis of the South Wales coalfield have yet to turn their attention to miners' experience of work and the working environment. Indeed, much like the traditional labour histories, much of the existing scholarship has located miners outside of the mine. This gap is surprising because work is an important site of identity formation – a place where masculinity was honed and performed, and where collective class-based identities were reinforced through shared experience. This thesis makes a notable break from existing scholarship in that it considers work as an evolving social and cultural site where miners' masculine identities were formed, performed and subject to challenge. It examines how and when miners were able to renegotiate their masculinity in response to industrial developments that changed the nature of mining labour, industrial relations and the economic geography of the region. Miners' personal testimonies provide a valuable opportunity to investigate which aspects of their masculinity and working identity miners sought to preserve, and which they were willing (and able) to renegotiate or let go of, when faced with significant disruption to their work and working environment. As such, this thesis pays particular attention to miners' attitudes towards key markers of masculinity associated with the performance of mining labour – namely, strength, skill, status, and the pay packet – as well as social relationships between miners, and the hierarchies of labour which existed underground. Given the preponderance of scholarship providing a gender-based analysis of the impact of being out-of-work on miners' masculine status, I have excluded miners' recollections of industrial action from the scope of this thesis. Strikes and lockouts feature in the following discussion only when they illuminate something of miners' experiences of

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

industrial change. Similarly, as this study is primarily concerned with exploring miners' experiences of work, social relations above ground and miners' homosocial leisure activities – whilst doubtlessly fruitful avenues of future research – sit outside the scope of this project.

The decision to focus this study on the South Wales coalfield was determined by the scale of the economic change that took place in the region between 1920 and 1970. Following a period of rapid expansion in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the coal industry dominated the regional economy. The industry was at its largest in 1920 when it employed more than a quarter of a million men – more than a fifth of the entire British mining workforce.<sup>20</sup> For a brief period of time at the beginning of the century, the South Wales coalfield was the largest coal producer in Britain. At its peak in 1913, the miners of South Wales produced almost fifty-seven million tons of coal in a single year – 19.5 percent of the total across all British coalfields.<sup>21</sup> The significance of the work they performed is difficult to overstate. Coal was the commodity which had stoked the fires of the industrial revolution and upon which much of the history of modern Britain rested. Coal mined in South Wales was internationally renowned for its premium quality and was in high demand, particularly for use in powering maritime trade and travel. Cunard's record-breaking Atlantic crossing times, for example, were made possible by the use of the highest quality steam coal from South Wales,

---

<sup>20</sup> Coal production and manpower statistics for the South Wales coalfield: SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board South Wales Area, 'General Statistics (South Wales Coalfield)', [1976].

<sup>21</sup> SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, South Wales Area, 'General Statistics'.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

and the British Admiralty's list of approved suppliers of coal for its ships consisted mostly of collieries located in the South Wales coalfield.<sup>22</sup>

By 1970, however, the industry was a fraction of its former size. Coal no longer occupied a position of primacy within the energy market. Old markets had been lost and the decrease in demand, combined with technological advancements which improved the efficiency of production, meant there was no longer the need for so many men to work underground. Whilst the contraction of the coal industry affected employment across all of Britain's coalfields, the large number of older collieries and the challenging geological conditions found in South Wales meant the region experienced a greater than average decline in manpower during this period. Between 1920 and 1970, manpower in the South Wales coal industry fell by more than eighty percent, to just 38,000.<sup>23</sup>

By focusing on South Wales, c. 1920-1970, this thesis also contributes to the historiography of an under-studied period of the region's coal mining history. Whilst there is a wide body of scholarship providing political, economic, and labour histories of the British coal industry across the whole of the twentieth century, the same breadth of coverage is not found in the historiography of the

---

<sup>22</sup> 'Mauretania's Record Breaking with Nixon's Navigation Steam Coal', *Western Mail*, 7 June 1909, p. 3; 'Cunarders and Welsh Coal', *South Wales Daily News*, 14 August 1909, p. 12. Steven Gray, *Steam Power and Sea Power: Coal, the Royal Navy, and the British Empire, c. 1870-1914* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 67-100.

<sup>23</sup> SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, South Wales Area, 'General Statistics'. For statistics on the British industry as a whole see: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Historical Coal Data: Coal Production, Availability and Consumption, 1853 to 2024 (2025)*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/historical-coal-data-coal-production-availability-and-consumption> [accessed 06/10/2025].

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

South Wales coalfield.<sup>24</sup> Historians providing a regional history of South Wales have often focused on the early development of the industry or the period of private ownership in the first half of the century.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, *The Fed*, which nominally claims to provide a history of the South Wales miners in the twentieth century, focuses predominantly on the era of private ownership.<sup>26</sup> The most notable intervention in the historiography of the coalfield for the period after 1947 is *The South Wales Miners, 1964-1985*, by Ben Curtis.<sup>27</sup> This work provides a socio-political institutional history of the coalfield in these years, with particular focus on the growing opposition to colliery closures and the contraction of the industry. Nevertheless, it remains the case that comparatively little attention has been paid by historians to the period after 1947. By examining the period c.1920-1970, this thesis expands our understanding of how key events within the industry's history

---

<sup>24</sup> B. R. Mitchell, *Economic Development of the British Coal Industry, 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); M. W. Kirby, *The British Coalmining Industry, 1870-1946: A Political and Economic History* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1977); Patrick Renshaw, *The General Strike* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975); William Ashworth (with the assistance of Mark Pegg), *The History of the British Coal Industry, Volume 5, 1946-1982: The Nationalized Industry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Andrew Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics*, 2 vols (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003; 2005) I-II; Andrew Perchard, Keith Gildart, Ben Curtis, Grace Millar, 'Fighting for the Soul of Coal: Colliery Closures and the Moral Economy of Nationalization in Britain, 1947-1994', *Enterprise & Society*, 26. 2 (2025), pp. 485-518; Jörg Arnold, *The British Miner in the Age of De-Industrialization: A Political and Cultural History: A Political and Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); Emily P. Webber, *Mining Men: Britain's Last Kings of the Coalface* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2025). Scholarship on the British coal industry also includes a significant body of works on the 1984-85 miners' strike, many of which were written contemporaneously. See, for example, *The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984-5*, ed. by Raphael Samuel, Barbara Bloomfield and Guy Boanas (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); Martin Adeney and John Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike 1984-5: Loss Without Limit* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); Francis Beckett and David Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line: The Miners' Strike and the Battle for Industrial Britain* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2009); Sheryl Bernadette Buckley, 'The State, the Police, and the Judiciary in the Miners' Strike: Observations and Discussions, thirty years on', *Capital & Class*, 39. 3 (2015), pp. 419-434.

<sup>25</sup> Arnot, *The Miners*, I-IV; Edwards, *South Wales Miners' Federation*; Chris Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield 1898-1947* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*.

<sup>27</sup> Ben Curtis, *The South Wales Miners, 1964-1985* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).

were experienced by miners in the South Wales coalfield. Furthermore, by tracing miners' evolving perceptions of their masculinity and working identity across these years, this thesis also brings our understanding of miners' masculinities into a new period.

At the beginning of this period, the working conditions for the men working in the region's collieries were atrocious. Miners worked long hours in cramped, dark, dusty environments, sometimes in water and always with the threat of injury, disease, and loss of life and limb. The tools they used had changed little over the course of the nineteenth century; peak production in the industry was reached at a time when mining was almost entirely dependent on the use of hand tools and the physical exertion of the workforce. Hours spent on exhausting work underground were often bookended by long journeys in and out of the colliery, with men hunched over in tunnels not tall enough to stand in.<sup>28</sup> There was little reward for undertaking such arduous, dangerous work. The direct profits of coal production went into the hands of the industry's private owners, whilst miners' wages were calculated on a piecework basis – any number of incidents or circumstances could disrupt work and limit their earning potential.

Miners' testimonies reveal, however, that within this fairly dismal set of coalfield-wide circumstances there was a great deal of local variation. Geological differences in the coal seams could mean miners were working on coal faces tall enough to stand up in, or – as described by South Wales miner Bert Coombes in a fictionalised account of the coal industry – in spaces barely big enough to crawl

---

<sup>28</sup> For descriptions of conditions in mines, see Coombes, B. L., *These Poor Hands* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1939), pp. 31-39.

through: 'The black coal-belt was thin where Jack was working – not more than twenty inches thick ... With his stomach pressed against the bottom and his back tight against the top ...'.<sup>29</sup> Coal seams could be dripping wet or uncomfortably hot; ventilation could be of reasonable or poor quality with a variation in dust levels to match. The quality of the coal could be such that it required considerable force and explosives to separate it from the coal face, or it could come away from the face in large clumps with relative ease – a condition which could lead to higher wages because of the piece rate system of pay. Miners might work in a colliery where the locally negotiated price list – that is, the list of rates that would be paid for the completion of certain tasks – was particularly favourable, or they might not. Similarly, they might work in a colliery where the relationship between the local union branch (known as the lodge) and colliery management was renowned for being fractious, or largely co-operative.<sup>30</sup> There was much then that served to differentiate miners' experiences of working in the coal industry even within a single coalfield.

This thesis pays particular attention to the interconnectedness of work and place, seeking to capture the ways in which local working conditions and circumstances served to mediate miners' perceptions of the coal industry and their sense of their own masculinity and working identity. The significance of geography to studies of masculinity in the workplace has also been noted elsewhere. In a recent (2023) study of Sheffield steelworkers, Helen Smith has

---

<sup>29</sup> B. L Coombes, 'The Flame', *New Writing*, 3 (1937); facsimile repr. *Penguin New Writing*, 4 (1941), pp. 62-66 (pp. 63).

<sup>30</sup> The broad range of working conditions outlined in this paragraph were encountered whilst listening to South Wales miners' oral histories and reading their published autobiographies. A full list of personal testimonies consulted can be found in the bibliography.

called for a reimagining of twentieth-century working-class masculinities to take account of the significance of both work *and* region. This combination of factors, Smith argues, allows for historians to capture both the commonalities and specifics of working-class men's experiences; work was the everyday experience shared by most working-class men in twentieth century Britain, whilst their different workplaces, industries and regions made these experiences unique.<sup>31</sup> This thesis is able to capture the ways in which geography mediated miners' perceptions of their masculinity and working identity by juxtaposing miners' testimonies against one another. This process reveals the similarities and differences of experience which emerge in the context of different working environments.

Region was not the only factor that served to mediate miners' experiences of work and industrial change, and their perceptions of their masculinity and working identity. Men's position in the lifecycle was also significant. Lifecycle is used in this thesis to mean the series of key moments or experiences that are commonly moved through during the course of a person's life. These experiences are historically and socially contingent as well as gendered, but might include moments such as starting work, marriage, promotion, and retirement. As Ben Curtis and Stephen Thompson have indicated, historians are perhaps most familiar with the concept of the lifecycle in relation to the study of poverty and its implications for an individual's economic status.<sup>32</sup> Central to this study is the

---

<sup>31</sup> Helen Smith, 'Reimagining working-class masculinities in the twentieth century', in *Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain: A History of the Present*, ed. by Matt Houlbrook, Katie Jones and Ben Mechen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), pp. 136-157.

<sup>32</sup> Curtis and Thompson, "This is the Country", *Cultural and Social History*, p. 588.

premise that career trajectory could also be mapped on to the lifecycle within a given occupational group. Curtis and Thompson were the first to advance this workplace-specific understanding of the lifecycle in their study of aged and ageing miners in the South Wales coalfield.<sup>33</sup> I build on their work in two ways: by considering how the miners' lifecycle was disrupted by industrial change, and by questioning how a miners' position within the lifecycle affected the way in which they navigated the challenges these changes posed to their masculinity and working identity.

As discussed above, the labour histories which have been the mainstay of the historiography of the British coal industry have prioritised institutional and collective narratives. The voices of individual miners have tended to be subsumed by this focus on the collective. This has remained the case even as the scope of the field expanded to include a greater focus on the social and cultural history of working-class institutions. Francis and Smith in *The Fed*, for example, considered miners in terms of mining communities and the 'rank and file'.<sup>34</sup> This thesis therefore marks another notable break from existing scholarship. A focus on miners' perceptions of their own masculinity and working identity demands that miners be treated first and foremost as individual gendered subjects. As such, the main source base for this study is the plethora of underutilised published autobiographies and pre-existing oral testimonies which capture the voices – figuratively or literally – of those who worked in the region's collieries in the years between 1920 and 1970.

---

<sup>33</sup> Curtis and Thompson, "This is the Country", *Cultural and Social History*.

<sup>34</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. xv-xvi.

Ego documents, in their various forms, have been much maligned by scholars who have questioned the veracity of accounts necessarily based on the experiences and recollections of individuals. Scholars who recognise the unique value of these sources – whether in the form of autobiography, oral history or otherwise – have become very adept at rebuking these concerns. In the following paragraphs, I outline my response to these reservations as they relate to the autobiographies and oral histories selected for use in this thesis. I consider the similarities and differences in form between these two related but distinct mediums, and I outline the approach I have taken in using these sources to address questions of miners' self-perception and identity.

There is a long history of autobiographical writing amongst Britain's coal miners. The earliest accounts date from the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.<sup>35</sup> Their twentieth-century counterparts are more numerous and were written by miners from across almost all of Britain's coalfields. The only British coalfield for which I was unable to identify any published autobiographies was Kent. This is likely a consequence of its small size. In 1913, just 1,100 men were employed at collieries in Kent, in comparison to the 233,100 employed in South Wales (the largest coalfield at that time).<sup>36</sup> The largest volume of published accounts comes from South Wales – a result perhaps of the size of the South Wales coalfield and its reputation for industrial militancy. There are nine published

---

<sup>35</sup> See for example: George Parkinson, *True Stories of Durham Pit-Life* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1912; repr. [n.p.]: Forgotten Books, 2012); *Richard Weaver's Life Story*, ed. by James Paterson (Kilmarnock: John Ritchie, [1897(?)]); repr. [n.p.]: Cornell University Library Digital Collections, [n.d.].

<sup>36</sup> J. Benson, *British coalminers in the Nineteen Century: A Social History* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 217.

autobiographies of miners and ex-miners whose authors had spent some or all of their working life employed at a South Wales colliery during the twentieth century. The autobiographies of miners who worked in other British coalfields are occasionally drawn upon in a comparative manner for the purpose of illuminating points of similarity and difference between regions.

The authors of these nine works were born around the turn of the century (c. 1884-1903), with one outlier born in 1921. Most were writing towards the end of their lives and, as such, their recorded recollections of the coal industry are predominantly confined to the first half of the century. Not all were employed in the mines after 1920. D. R. Davies had left the coal industry in 1910 following his diagnosis with nystagmus – an eye condition which can be caused by prolonged exposure to low light conditions such as those found in a colliery.<sup>37</sup> Jack Jones served in the army during the First World War and suffered shrapnel wounds which prevented him from later returning to colliery work. He did, however, take a full-time position as a union representative for the Blaengarw colliery miners – a position he held for several years from 1923.<sup>38</sup> In another case, the period covered by the autobiography ends c. 1921.<sup>39</sup> Despite sitting outside of the main periodisation of this thesis, these autobiographies have been included because they provide rich insight into the authors' relationship with the coal industry – both during their boyhood and after joining the mining workforce – as well as their experiences of minework during the era of hand-got production. They illustrate the

---

<sup>37</sup> D. R. Davies, *In Search of Myself* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1961), pp. 54-58.

<sup>38</sup> Jack Jones, *Unfinished Journey* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938), p. 164 and pp. 205-206.

<sup>39</sup> Wil Jon Edwards, *From the Valley I Came* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1956).

significance of the lifecycle clearly and are included here alongside other autobiographies and testimonies to further enhance our understanding of the role minework played in shaping constructions of masculinity and working identity in the early years of the twentieth century.

These autobiographies are explored alongside oral testimonies which were originally collected in the 1970s and 1980s and now form part of the South Wales Coalfield Collection (SWCC) at the South Wales Miners' Library (SWML). There was a sense of urgency surrounding the collection of oral histories during these decades as recognition grew regarding the capacity of the medium to capture the voices of those who might otherwise leave little record of their lives. A similar urgency was evident in the creation of the SWCC in 1969. The process of gathering materials for this collection was described by its main architect, Francis – co-author of *The Fed* – as a 'salvage operation', created in response to the 'real pressure [that] came from the crushing realisation that irreplaceable local material was being destroyed' as a consequence of ongoing pit closures.<sup>40</sup> The First South Wales Coalfield Project (hereafter, First Coalfield Project), which ran c. 1972-1974, was set up to further this objective. The project was later expanded to include a significant oral history component with the aim of producing a labour and social history of the coalfield up until 1945. The majority of these interviews were conducted by Francis himself – occasionally joined by Smith (co-author of *The Fed*) – and the remainder by the wider research team: David Egan, Merfyn Jones and Alun Morgan. These interviews were then supplemented by a Second South

---

<sup>40</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. xviii.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Wales Coalfield Project, which ran between 1979-1982, focusing on the coalfield in the period after 1945.<sup>41</sup> Whilst Francis led on this project, the majority of the interviews were conducted by researcher Kim Howells. Across both projects, more than 300 interviews were conducted with members of South Wales mining communities, local and national union leaders, colliery managers, and politicians.

These interviews are a rich and valuable source which has been underutilised by historians of the coalfield. As David Selway notes, the first studies to make use of this material – namely *The Fed*, and Francis' *Miners' Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* – used them for illustrative purposes and to shed light on specific experiences.<sup>42</sup> These studies did not attempt a deeper analysis that engaged with the inherent subjectivity of this source material and have thus only skimmed the very surface of what it is possible for these sources to reveal. Since then, there has been little in the way of substantial engagement with these sources. Curtis makes sparing use of a small number of the SWCC testimonies in *The South Wales Miners* to address issues of consciousness and opinion which could not otherwise be gathered from the official records of the miners' union.<sup>43</sup> To date, the only sustained engagement with these interviews for the purpose of exploring the attitudes and experiences of mining community members can be found in Selway's currently unpublished PhD thesis, 'Collective

---

<sup>41</sup> *Audio Collection: South Wales Coalfield Collection*, <https://lisweb.swan.ac.uk/swcc/> [accessed 5 September 2025].

<sup>42</sup> David Selway, 'Collective Memory in the Mining Communities of South Wales' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2017), p. 34. See also: Francis and Smith, *The Fed*; Hywel Francis, *Miners' Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984).

<sup>43</sup> Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 13.

Memory in the Mining Communities of South Wales'.<sup>44</sup> Selway's thesis established that South Wales mining communities in the 1970s had powerful collective memories of events during the interwar period (including, for example, of strikes and lockouts, and the depression) which developed as personal recollections of these events interacted with representations of the past presented by the union, political parties and the press. Whilst the entirety of the SWCC audio collection remains underutilised, engagement with the interviews collected during the Second Coalfield Project has been particularly sparse. This reflects the persistent gap in coalfield historiography after 1945. This study is the first to use these testimonies in a substantial way to provide a gender-based analysis of miners' experiences within the coal industry.

Given the wide-ranging coverage of the SWCC audio collections, relevant interviews were identified by means of a keyword search of the online catalogue for terms related to the industrial developments with which this thesis is concerned (e.g. mechanisation, nationalisation). Access to these interviews was delayed, however, by the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time, the published autobiographies – which could be accessed without the need for travel – formed the main focus of my research. This had a lasting effect on the subject and structure of this thesis which I outline later. I had initially hoped to listen to all of the interviews identified through the keyword search, but delayed access meant that this was not feasible. As such, I prioritised listening to interviews with 'rank and file' members of the workforce and local union leaders because these were

---

<sup>44</sup> Selway, 'Collective Memory'.

the men who had personal experience of working in the coal industry in South Wales during the period of study. Interviews with colliery managers and politicians were not disregarded entirely in recognition of the value these sources would add in contextualising the changes that miners experienced in their working environment. A small number were selected from those identified through the keyword list and listened to alongside the interviews of miners and lodge officials. In total, I listened to and transcribed thirty-five interviews from the collection. From these, I selected twenty-eight for analysis in this study based on the richness of the data they provided on miners' experiences of industrial change.

Most of the interviews were drawn from the Second Coalfield Project – a reflection of the temporal focus of the project – with others drawn from the First Coalfield Project and, occasionally, from other audio collections within the SWCC. Working with a relatively small number of autobiographies and interviews allowed for a qualitative analysis to be undertaken at depth. This approach is particularly suited to exploring questions of personal identity perception as it enables miners' recollections of and responses to industrial developments to be explored within the context of the broader life-narrative constructed within the interview.

The qualitative analysis undertaken in this thesis is one which is sensitive to both the similarities and differences between the mediums of autobiography and oral history. The two mediums have much in common. Both, of course, are histories of self. They provide individuals with the opportunity to recall, reflect upon, share and record their own life experiences. Despite these commonalities, autobiographies and oral histories require different treatment in historical

research. To state the obvious, oral histories are a verbal medium. Their use as a historical source requires the historian to recognise that meaning is conveyed not just through the words spoken, but in the way that they are said. The tone the interviewee used, their sighs, pauses, and the words or topics they chose to stress, brush over, or avoid completely provide additional – often vital – opportunity for interpretation of the meanings that individuals attached to their personal experiences and memories.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, all twenty-eight interviews explored in this thesis were listened to in full. Whilst listening, I sought to capture these nuances as they became apparent and made notes of my initial interpretations. Incorporating the specific oral qualities of these testimonies into my analysis enabled a greater depth of insight into miners' responses to industrial change and their perceptions of their own identity.

Questions about veracity have doggedly followed oral history studies since its popularisation in the 1970s. Amongst its strongest critics were a number of eminent historians, including Eric Hobsbawm, who dismissed oral history as 'personal memory ... a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts'.<sup>46</sup> These early criticisms continue to influence attitudes towards the use of oral history. In *The South Wales Miners*, for example, Curtis displays reluctance to accept the credibility of miners' oral testimonies, citing the Hobsbawm quote above. He

---

<sup>45</sup> On engagement with the orality of oral history see Corinna M. Peniston-Bird, 'Oral History: The Sound of Memory', in *History Beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed. by Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 105-121; Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 18-32. On silences within oral history see Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, trans. by Robert Lumley and Jude Bloomfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>46</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997; repr. London: Abacus, 2007), p. 273.

acknowledges the value of oral testimony in capturing experiences that would otherwise be lost to the historical record, and as a tool for accessing issues of opinion, whilst also stating that he measures this material against other primary sources and second literature 'so as to provide a framework against which it can be measured'.<sup>47</sup> Oral historians have repeatedly rebuked these critiques. They have noted that sources of all types are subjective and liable to contain exaggeration, omission, and inaccuracy.<sup>48</sup> The approach adopted by Curtis – of seeking to triangulate oral histories with other material – is one which is important for a historian working in any context with any source material. To lay special claim to this approach for the purpose of fact-checking oral testimonies is to create a false hierarchy between source types. The unfortunate side-effect of this approach is the relegation of personal testimony within the historical record to the realm of a nice-to-have.<sup>49</sup>

Much depends on the questions the historian chooses to ask of their source material. Whilst early oral historians were perhaps more concerned with the possibility of accessing aspects of the past that would typically leave little trace in formal records, more recent scholarship has tended towards an increasing use of oral histories to explore questions of subjectivity and narrative.<sup>50</sup> This transition owes much to Alessandro Portelli whose work on oral history challenged scholars to engage directly with the unreliability of the material, its 'errors, inventions, and

---

<sup>47</sup> Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> See for example Peniston-Bird, 'Oral History', in *History Beyond the Text*, ed. by Barber and Peniston-Bird, p. 107; Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), pp. 73-82.

<sup>49</sup> This point has also been made by Corinna M. Peniston-Bird, 'Oral History', p. 107.

<sup>50</sup> For an overview of the development of the field, see Penny Summerfield, *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 106-108.

myths' in order to uncover deeper meaning.<sup>51</sup> It is the subjectivity of miners' testimonies with which this thesis is concerned. Rather than seeking an objective 'truth', I am concerned with miners' *perceptions* of their gender and working identity in the context of their changing work environment. There is no better source material than miners' autobiographies and oral testimonies with which to examine their evolving perceptions of self.

Another criticism commonly levelled against the use of personal narratives as historical sources is the difficulty of demonstrating representativeness. Even David Vincent, whose work alongside that of John Burnett fuelled much interest in the use of working-class autobiographies for historical research, expressed doubt 'about the "truth" and "relevance" of works which are necessarily subjective in form and limited in number'.<sup>52</sup> Of the writers of working-class autobiography, Hobsbawm similarly claimed, 'they often spoke in untypical voices by virtue of the fact that they belonged to the anomalous minority which wrote for publication'.<sup>53</sup> As Penny Summerfield demonstrates, historians have approached this issue of representativeness in a variety of ways.<sup>54</sup> For the most part, these approaches can be divided between two broad categories: those which accept the premise of this critique and therefore seek to demonstrate the representativeness of their source

---

<sup>51</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 2; see also Alessandro Portelli, 'Living Voice: The Oral History Interview as Dialogue and Experience', *Oral History Review*, 45. 2 (2018), pp. 239-248 (pp.247-248).

<sup>52</sup> David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London: Europa, 1981), p. 4. See also John Burnett, *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1974).

<sup>53</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), p. 177.

<sup>54</sup> Summerfield, *Histories of the Self*, pp. 135-166.

material through a variety of sampling methods; and those which reject the notion of the necessity of representativeness within a source base and instead place value on the individual whose voice is captured by the personal narrative.<sup>55</sup> It is this second approach that Summerfield notes has tended to be adopted by historians who 'use personal narratives to explore constructions of the self and subjectivity in interaction with shifting discourses that circulated in the material world of everyday life in the past'.<sup>56</sup> It is this approach that most closely reflects how the oral testimonies and autobiographies have been utilised in this thesis. The aim of this thesis is to capture the range of responses miners had to their changing work environment and the possible effects on their sense of self. This allows us to see commonalities within the evolving constructions of masculinity and working identity in the coalfield.

As interest grew in oral history as a method of investigating the past, and audio collections in local and national archives proliferated, scholars began to ask questions about the afterlife of these materials.<sup>57</sup> From these discussions emerged a consensus that the re-use of pre-existing oral testimonies requires the researcher to take account of an additional set of considerations alongside those – outlined above – that are typically associated with oral history. One of these

---

<sup>55</sup> These broad categories have been synthesised from the variety of responses discussed by Summerfield, *Histories of the Self*, pp. 135-166.

<sup>56</sup> Summerfield, *Histories of the Self*, p. 137.

<sup>57</sup> Some early interventions in this area include Paul Thompson, 'Re-using Qualitative Research Data: A Personal Account', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1. 3 (2000), <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1044> [accessed 5 September 2025]; Joanne Bornat, 'A Second Take: Revisiting Interviews with a Different Purpose', *Oral History*, 31. 1 (2003), pp. 47-53. More recent scholarship includes Abigail Knight, Julia Brannen and Rebecca O'Connell, 'Re-using Community Oral History Sources on Food and Family Life in the First World War', *Oral History*, 43. 1 (2015), pp. 63-72; April Gallwey, 'The Rewards of Using Archived Oral Histories in Research: The Case of the Millennium Memory Bank', *Oral History*, 41. 1 (2013), pp. 37-50.

considerations relates to the feasibility and validity of revisiting oral histories with a different set of questions from those of the original researcher. Historians have had considerable success in navigating these issues. Rosemary Elliot, for example, has re-revisited a collection of interviews which focused on family life and social circumstance in Britain in order to examine the role of smoking in people's lives during the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> Her selection of this interview set was based on her awareness that the coverage of these interviews neatly dovetailed with the direction of contemporary scholarship. In Elliot's words, the insight into 'social networks and family relationships' that these interviews provided, 'seemed a key area to explore given the voluminous literature on the competing roles of peer and parental influence in smoking initiation'.<sup>59</sup> It was this dovetailing of research question with source material that Elliot concluded was necessary for 'valuable insights [to] be gained from secondary analysis of an interview set'.<sup>60</sup> Much, then, depends on the suitability of the questions being asked of the interviews.

What does this mean in relation to the interviews selected for analysis in this thesis? On the one hand, the Coalfield Project interviews, with their focus on miners' recollections of events and developments within the coal industry, are a neat and tidy match for the topics this thesis seeks to explore. On the other hand, masculinity was not a topic of focus in the original projects. The absence of an explicit discussion of masculinity is not a challenge that is unique to this study. Historians of masculinity have long grappled with this issue. As early as 1994, John

---

<sup>58</sup> Rosemary Elliot, 'Growing Up and Giving Up: Smoking in Paul Thompson's 100 Families', *Oral History*, 29. 1 (2001), pp. 73-84.

<sup>59</sup> Elliot, 'Growing Up and Giving Up', *Oral History*, p. 74.

<sup>60</sup> Elliot, 'Growing Up and Giving Up', *Oral History*, p. 82.

Tosh, one of the historians at the forefront of the development of the field, noted the invisibility of masculinity within western societies – a consequence, he argued, of men being ‘the norm’ against which women were measured. ‘In the historical record,’ Tosh determined, ‘it is as though masculinity is everywhere but nowhere’.<sup>61</sup> This same language appears again in Sonya Rose’s work on temperate masculinity: ‘In Second World War Britain the requisites of manliness were evident everywhere and nowhere’.<sup>62</sup> On both occasions, the use of this phrase was intended to capture the rarity with which masculinity was the explicit topic of discussion, as well as the ubiquitous presence of representations of masculinity – and its associated meanings – within British society. The study of masculinity often requires historians to read between the lines. In personal testimony, this means looking for key markers (e.g status, pay, relationship with colleagues, physicality) which can reveal something of an individual’s perception of masculinity. This is the approach this study has taken.

Miners’ autobiographies and oral testimonies are explored in this thesis alongside a variety of other source materials. These materials include newspaper articles published in the South Wales region, (NCB) recruitment advertisements, union publications (namely, *The Miner*, a monthly periodical aimed at those working in the industry and their families), and government reports into conditions within the industry. These sources are included for the purpose of supplementing and contextualising the personal testimonies – an approach that enables the

---

<sup>61</sup> John Tosh, ‘What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Some Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *History Workshop*, 38. 1 (1994), pp. 179-202 (p. 180).

<sup>62</sup> Sonya O. Rose, ‘Temperate Heroes: Concepts of Masculinity in Second World War Britain’, in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, ed. by Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 177-195 (p. 177).

development of a deeper understanding of miners' experiences. In this way, this thesis contributes to broader discussions within labour histories pertaining to the development of the industry and the relationship between the NCB and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The testimonies of individual miners, when juxtaposed against industry, government and union materials, can provide new insight into points of tension between the direction of the industry and the preferences of the workforce.

As mentioned above, delayed access to the archive led to much of my initial research time being directed towards the published autobiographical accounts of South Wales miners and their counterparts in other British coalfields. My focus at this time was on the genre-specific conventions of autobiographical writing – most notably, the tendency towards constructing a cohesive life narrative across the entire life course beginning in childhood or even at the author's birth. For this reason, the first chapter of this thesis considers the childhood experiences of those who grew up in mining families and communities in the early twentieth century. In doing so, it provides necessary contextualisation for the discussions which follow in later chapters. A focus on boyhood in mining communities allows us to build an understanding of the future these miners were able to imagine for themselves before entering the mines. The inevitability of minework is a theme that runs throughout many of the personal testimonies explored in this chapter and is one which is returned to in later chapters as miners were required to imagine new futures for themselves in response to the contraction of the coal industry.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Chapters Two through Four then move to consider miners' experiences of minework itself. These chapters move roughly chronologically through a series of key developments in the coal industry between 1920 and 1970 in order to explore how these developments affected miners' perceptions of their own masculinity and working identity.

Chapter Two focuses on the piecemeal replacement of hand-got mining techniques with machine-mining methods which began in earnest after the First World War and continued into the 1950s and 1960s with the introduction of more advanced machinery. This chapter examines the impact mechanisation had on the position of miners within the labour process as well as the system of social relations which had developed underground. In doing so, it considers the extent to which mechanisation served to disrupt miners' perceptions of their masculinity and working identity, paying particular attention to how these effects were felt by miners at different points in the lifecycle. It also argues for the significance of geological conditions in shaping local and regional patterns of mechanisation, the division of labour, and the development of social relations within the colliery.

Technological advancements in the coal mining process were only the first of several major changes to transform the coal industry in the twentieth century. Chapter Three is concerned with the nationalisation of the industry in 1947 and the resultant period of greater cooperation between the NUM and colliery management which lasted until the early 1970s. It examines miners' reactions to the union's policy of inaction over pit closures within the broader context of their hopes for increased job security under public ownership. In doing so, it considers

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

how miners' expectations of nationalisation and their reactions to union policy were differentiated by lifecycle stage and by prior experiences of poverty, unemployment and collective action. Issues under consideration in this chapter include the interplay of collectivism, morality and masculinity.

The fourth and final chapter of this thesis focuses on miners' recollections of the pit closure programmes of the 1950s and 1960s. It considers how miners renegotiated masculinity in response to pit closures through an examination of the decisions to move within, leave, and even return to the industry following a period of alternative employment. Attention is paid to how miners reimagined their futures in response to the changing industrial geography of the coalfield. Through an examination of the challenges associated with colliery transfers, this chapter sheds light on the highly localised nature of miners' masculinities and working identities, and the challenges of translating these identities from one environment to another.

This thesis furthers our understanding of masculinity in the South Wales coalfield by examining how and when miners were able – and willing – to renegotiate their perceptions of their own masculinity in response to changes in their work and working environment. It draws historians' attention to two factors that are repeatedly found to mediate miners' experiences of, and responses to, industrial change: their location within the coalfield (geography), and their position in the lifecycle. In exploring the period between 1920 and 1970, this thesis moves scholarly understanding of miners' masculinities into decades previously unexplored by scholars providing a gender-based analysis of the coalfield. Unlike prior studies that have tended to focus on South Wales in the 1920s and 1930s (a

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

period when many miners experienced being out of work), this thesis pushes beyond a binary understanding of work as something men in the coalfield either had access to or not. In doing so, it sheds light on the changing significance of work as a site of identity formation, and on the interaction of masculinity and working identity in the coalfield. Whilst traditional labour histories have centred collective and institutional narratives, this thesis prioritises the voices of individual miners. By exploring how shared experiences are mediated by individual circumstance, this thesis provides new insight into the process by which some miners were able to disentangle their perceptions of their own masculinity from the performance of mining labour.

## Chapter 1

### Mining Boyhood: The formation of coal miners' masculinities and working identities.

This chapter focuses on the childhood recollections of South Wales miners who grew up in mining families and communities at the turn of the twentieth century. During these years, the coal industry was rapidly expanding and there was a voracious demand for manpower within the region's mines. With limited opportunities for alternative employment, it was common for multiple men from the same family to work in the coal industry, often within the same colliery. Boys often grew up with older male relatives – usually a father, but also brothers, uncles and grandfathers – in the local mines. Consequently, many boys who became miners in the first half of the twentieth century did so with a degree of pre-existing knowledge of the coal industry and the nature of mining labour. Despite the fact that many miners' relationship with the coal industry began long before they joined the workforce, historians of the coalfield have paid scant attention to childhood experiences of growing up in a mining household. Amongst scholars providing a gender-based analysis of the coalfield, only Sue Bruley's work addresses the subject of childhood in any detail. Her study of the 1926 lockout includes a discussion of efforts to feed the children of miners during the dispute.<sup>1</sup> There has not yet been any consideration of the insight miners' recollections of childhood might provide into questions of gender and occupational identity formation. I draw

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926*, pp. 52-59. See also Bruley, 'The Politics of Food', *Twentieth Century British History*, pp. 54-77.

on miners' recollections of growing up in an intergenerational mining household in order to develop an understanding of the expectations boys had of minework, and of the future they were able to imagine for themselves. By exploring boys' perceptions of what it meant to be a miner, this chapter recognises childhood experiences as formative to many miners' understandings of masculinity and working identity.

Childhood and the experience of childhood have been topics of historical interest for upwards of half a century. Debates in this field began following the publication of Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* in 1962.<sup>2</sup> In the years following, historians took issue with various aspects of Ariès work including his assertion that concepts of childhood 'did not exist within medieval society and had only emerged as a separate entity as society increasingly required the removal of children from adult environments for the purpose of education.'<sup>3</sup> This characterisation of the medieval period has since been roundly rejected.<sup>4</sup> In more recent scholarship historians have shifted their focus away from 'ideas of childhood' in favour of examining the nature of the parent-child relationship.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the understanding of childhood as a socially contingent concept has remained. This contingency presents historians with a recurring challenge. Namely, how should childhood be defined? Some have considered childhood within specific age parameters. Hugh Cunningham, in

---

<sup>2</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. by Robert Baldick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, p. 125 and pp. 396-397.

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Wilson, 'The Infancy of the History of Childhood: An Appraisal of Philippe Ariès', *History and Theory*, 19. 2 (1980), pp. 132-153.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the development of the field, see Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (London: Longman, 1995), pp. 4-18.

*Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, places the upper age limit at fifteen. The problem with this approach, as Cunningham himself acknowledges, is its arbitrary nature: ‘...in nearly all [Western] societies people have differed quite substantially in their thinking on the age at which childhood ends’.<sup>6</sup> In a 2021 article, Elizabeth Ritchie and Neil Bruce attempted to define childhood in Northern Scotland during the period 1770-1820 and concluded that there was no set age that marked the transition out of childhood. They noted that some events did mark a shift – the end of school and the start of work, for example – ‘but their nature, the level of independence created, and the age at which it occurred’ depended on a variety of factors including gender, family and socio-economic circumstance.<sup>7</sup>

This thesis considers age too blunt a tool to define the edges of boyhood in mining communities in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Miners’ testimonies place little emphasis on age as an indicator of an individual’s position in the lifecycle. Instead, they determined the boundaries of childhood in terms of key life events, most notably the end of their school days and their first day of colliery work. The age at which these events occurred was dependent, to a large degree, on the legislative landscape concerning childhood education and employment. The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century was a period in which compulsory education was expanding. The Elementary Education Act of 1880 made school attendance compulsory in England and Wales for children between the ages of five and ten.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the century, the school leaving age

---

<sup>6</sup> Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Ritchie and Neil Bruce with contributions by Helen Barton, Jamie Bockover, and Hayley Taylor, “‘Take Up the Man and Lay Down the Boy’: Defining Rural Childhood in Northern Scotland During the Enlightenment”, *Northern Scotland*, 12. 1 (2021), pp. 86-96 (p. 88).

<sup>8</sup> Elementary Education Act 1880 (43 & 44 Vict, c.23) (London: HMSO).

had risen to twelve, though pupils who achieved the required educational standard could receive certification enabling them to leave education from employment from age ten.<sup>9</sup> The Education Act 1918, which came into effect in 1921, increased the leaving age to fourteen and abolished such exemptions which enabled pupils to finish their schooling early.<sup>10</sup> During this same period, employment legislation affecting the coal industry was also passed. The Mines (Prohibition of Child Labour Underground) Act, 1900 raised the age at which boys could be employed underground from twelve (or ten if the boy had reached the required educational standard) to thirteen.<sup>11</sup> This thesis therefore understands the end of the childhood stage of the lifecycle in relation to the markers of transition that the miners themselves recognised. For this reason, this chapter explores miners' recollections of their boyhood experiences up to and including the point at which they left school and began work in the mines for the first time.

Of course, not all miners' lives neatly map on to this common sequence of events. Most of the miners whose testimonies are explored in this thesis joined the coal industry immediately after leaving compulsory education. Most, as mentioned above, had also grown up in mining households. There are some, however, for whom this was not the case. South Wales miner and writer, Bert Coombes, for example, joined the industry aged seventeen in search of better paid work than he could find on the farms near his family home in Herefordshire.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the previous two generations of men in James Griffiths' family had been

---

<sup>9</sup> Elementary Education (School Attendance) Act (1893) Amendment Act, 1899 (56 & 57 Vict, c.51) (London: HMSO).

<sup>10</sup> Education Act, 1918 (8 & 9 Geo 5, c.39) (London: HMSO) p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Mines (Prohibition of Child Labour Underground) Act, 1900 (63 & 64 Vic, c. 21).

<sup>12</sup> Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, pp. 7-17.

blacksmiths; he and his brothers were the first to join the coal industry from their immediate family.<sup>13</sup> Rather than exclude testimonies from miners such as Coombes and Griffiths, I draw on their recollections as a point of comparison. They provide a means to consider not only the varying levels of knowledge of minework with which individuals entered the industry, but also the function of childhood experiences within miners' personal testimonies.

This chapter predominantly draws on South Wales miners' autobiographies, with written accounts of miners from other British coalfields also utilised as a means of illustrating points of regional similarity and difference. This approach reflects the different treatment childhood experiences receive in the miners' autobiographies and oral histories. Whether or not miners were consciously aware of doing so (or were perhaps guided to do so by their editors), their published autobiographies typically conformed to the conventional features of the genre. Most were written, for example, in a chronological fashion, beginning with the author's birth or early childhood and progressing through major life milestones up until the point of writing.<sup>14</sup> Descriptions of home and family life appear more frequently in miners' memories of childhood than at any other period in their lives. Consequently, the home was reproduced as an intergenerational site – a space in which the young boy interacted with and observed his relatives. Despite the plurality of mining role models evident within the accounts, miners' recollections typically placed a greater emphasis on intergenerational relationships – their

---

<sup>13</sup> James Griffiths, *Pages from Memory* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1969), pp. 2-5.

<sup>14</sup> John Burnett identifies writing about childhood as a genre-specific feature of autobiography: John Burnett, *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education, and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1982), p. 3.

childhood relationship with their father (or occasionally, their grandfather) – with comparatively little attention paid to siblings. The space within the autobiographies allocated to recollections of childhood varied considerably, but regardless of length or level of detail the memories included reveal something of the individual themselves: their priorities, interests, and – of particular significance to this study – their sense of their own identity.

Miners' oral testimonies were subject to different constraints. The co-constructed nature of oral histories means that the interests of the interviewer play a significant role in shaping the direction and focus of the interview. In the case of the Second Coalfield Project, focus was directed towards miners' experiences within the coal industry with comparatively little time dedicated to capturing miners' recollections of their lives before they began work. It is apparent from listening to many of these interviews that the researchers working on the Second Coalfield Project had a rough interview schedule that was adjusted on a case-by-case basis to capture the breadth of experiences miners and leaders had of the coal industry. Unfortunately, the original schedule has not been preserved in the SWCC. Often the questions asked by the interviewer were intended to gather little more information than where the interviewee was born, whether their family had connections to the industry, and whether mining was their first job after leaving school. They did on occasion, however, ask miners about the circumstances which led to their employment in the industry. Miners' responses to this question feature towards the end of this chapter as part of a discussion about the agency, or lack of agency, boys possessed in determining their futures.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

This chapter begins by considering the purpose of recollections of childhood within miners' autobiographies, and what the inclusion of these memories reveals about the authors' sense of self. It then explores miners' recollections of their family homes, the gendered division of labour, and community responses to hardship to shed light on how growing up in a mining family served to shape boys' understandings of what it meant to be a man in the South Wales coalfield. The final portion of this chapter focuses on miners' recollections of leaving school and joining the mining workforce. It considers how miners' recalled feeling during this moment of transition, and the circumstances which led to them joining the industry.

Life-story telling, as it is commonly understood today, is perceived to have a dual purpose: first, the reimagining of past events to form a formal narrative, and secondly, the presentation of a version of the self that the narrator feels comfortable with. Graham Dawson, the main expounder of this concept, has termed it 'composure', thus playing on the dual meaning of the verb 'to compose'.<sup>15</sup> The process of composure is complex, involving the selection and organising of events in a manner which amplifies certain components of the narrative and silences others. The presence of miners' recollections of childhood within their autobiographies is, therefore, indicative of the significance of this phase of life – and the specific events recalled – to miners' sense of self. As Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas argue, the presence of the child and childhood experiences in

---

<sup>15</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 22-23.

autobiography ‘functions to explain the adult self that the subject becomes’.<sup>16</sup> As we shall see, those who grew up in mining households had a wealth of childhood experiences on which they could draw to build a coherent life-story of their identity as miners. This was not the case for those with limited or no familial connection to the coal industry. Yet, these men often still included amongst their selected childhood memories instances which brought them into contact with the coal industry in some manner. Griffiths, President of the South Wales Miners’ Federation (SWMF) (1934-36) and later the Labour MP for Llanelli, is a case in point. As mentioned above, Griffiths and his brothers were the first generation of his family to work in the South Wales mines. His recollections of childhood, however, include a description of him helping his father at the smithy with ‘the sharpening and tempering of the collier’s mandrels [pickaxes with points on each side] and the making of hobnails for the colliers’ pit boots.’ He also recalled how providing services for colliers ‘meant changing the working hours at the smithy – for the colliers would bring their tools at the end of their shift around five in the evening, and they had to be ready for the next morning’.<sup>17</sup> With this recollection, Griffiths is able to demonstrate his familiarity with the industry – the tools, terminology and rhythms of colliery life – as well as his family’s broader integration within the local mining community. In selecting this memory for inclusion within his autobiography, Griffiths was engaging in the process of composing a coherent

---

<sup>16</sup> Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas, ‘Telling Tales: Autobiographies of Childhood and Youth’, *Prose Studies*, 35: 1 (2013), pp. 1-6 (p. 1).

<sup>17</sup> Griffiths, *Pages from Memory*, p. 5.

life narrative – one where his identity as a miner can be traced back to his childhood experiences.

Coombes, who spent much of his adolescence in Herefordshire where his family worked as tenant farmers, similarly included an interaction with the coal industry in his recollections of childhood. He described helping his father to deliver coal to local families at Christmastime:

I can remember how I stood minding the horses while my father loaded the coal at the station ... I was astounded to see several full trucks of coal and was puzzled as to how they managed to get it into a truck. I asked the porter about this mystery, and he did not seem to be any more of an expert on coal-loading than myself.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike Griffiths, Coombes emphasises his *lack* of knowledge about the workings of the coal industry, and his interest in learning more. This is an intriguing decision not least because Coombes had lived with his family in South Wales when he was between the ages of approximately ten and fourteen. During these years his father had been employed in Deep Navigation Colliery.<sup>19</sup> His connection to the industry was, therefore, stronger than he implied in his autobiography. Coombes appears to have made an authorial decision to silence this part of his childhood in order to present himself first and foremost as a newcomer to the industry. His decision to do so may have stemmed from his feelings of unfamiliarity with minework which he experienced when he first joined the workforce. By this age, boys who had joined

---

<sup>18</sup> Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> 'He Sent the Message of the Miner Around the World', *Porthcawl Guardian*, 27 September 1963, p. 21. See also Seth Armstrong Twigg, 'Bert Lewis Coombes (1893-1974), coal miner and writer', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <https://biography.wales/article/s12-COOM-LEW-1893> [accessed 23 September 2025]; Bill Jones and Chris Williams, *B. L. Coombes: Writers of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), pp. 9-10.

the industry immediately after finishing compulsory education could expect to have three years of mining experience. Coombes only managed to secure colliery employment after being coached by a friend on how to cover up his inexperience. Having told the colliery clerk that he had worked at 'Duffryn Colliery' in the past, Coombes was then asked to confirm that miners typically called this colliery 'Deep Duffryn'. In response, Coombes nodded, 'feeling that if he [the clerk] only knew a bit about that colliery he knew more than I did'.<sup>20</sup> His decision to silence certain elements of his childhood can, therefore, be understood as a response to the challenge of reconciling different elements of his life history: his nervousness and inexperience on the one hand and, on the other, the years he spent in the South Wales coalfield when his father worked in the mines. In this sense, the absence of these childhood experiences can be viewed as a necessary step for ensuring the composure of a coherent life narrative that Coombes was comfortable with.

For others, however, a claim to a mining heritage was asserted both as a means of establishing their mining credentials and of confirming their occupational identity. Those who could lay claim to multiple generations of forefathers within the industry typically included a genealogical overview within the opening pages of their autobiographies. Robert Morgan, whose working life began in the South Wales coal mines before he pursued a career as a writer, artist and teacher, notes his long-standing familial connection to the industry: 'My father, his father and grandfather had all been coal miners, so it seemed natural that I should become one'.<sup>21</sup> This was a common feature of autobiographies written by

---

<sup>20</sup> Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1981), foreword.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

miners from across Britain's coalfields who could lay similar claim to a mining heritage over multiple generations. The Scottish miners' leader, Abe Moffat (born in 1896 in Lumphinnans, Fife), stated on the opening page of *My Life with the Miners*:

Since I come from a strong mining family ... it was not surprising that coal was in my blood from the day I was born. We were surrounded by coal and mining families.

My grandmother worked on the pit-head and my grandfather was one of the pioneers in building the trade union movement in the Lothians coalfield...

My mother worked on the pit-head, and my father was a miner all his life...<sup>22</sup>

There are remarkable similarities in the claims made in these accounts. Both Morgan and Moffat place their personal relationship with the coal industry within a historical context; their families' long-standing connection to the coal industry was explained as a factor which served to determine their own future. Quite apart from the sense of inevitability encoded within these descriptions, Morgan and Moffat both present their occupational identity as deeply rooted. Their work as coal miners spoke to more than just *what* they were, but *who* they were. These statements of origin may have been of particular importance for both men because their careers had ultimately taken them away from the coal industry. Their family heritage allowed them to confidently assert their mining identity even after many years away from the mine.

Morgan and Moffat's accounts differ in one key regard: gender. Morgan outlines his occupational heritage entirely in relation to the men in his family,

---

<sup>22</sup> Abe Moffat, *My Life with the Miners* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1965), p. 9.

whilst Moffat mentions multiple generations of both male and female relatives who were members of the mining workforce. Angela John's study of 'pit brow lasses' reveals that the pattern of women's colliery employment in Britain was highly regionalised. Throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the coalfields in East Scotland and South Wales, alongside Yorkshire, South Staffordshire and West Lancashire were the main employers of women colliery workers.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Moffat's account is unusual. Of the autobiographies of British coal miners surveyed for this study, mention of women's employment in the coal industry features in only two: Moffat's *My Life with the Miners*, and Jack Lawson's *A Man's Life*, which I explore below.<sup>24</sup> None of the autobiographies or oral histories of South Wales miners that were consulted for this study make mention of female colliery employment. This is not surprising given the relatively small numbers in which women were employed. The 1842 Mines and Collieries Act banned women from working underground but did not prevent women taking employment at a colliery's surface works.<sup>25</sup> As surface workers, their numbers were not insignificant, but they never made up more than a small proportion of the total surface workforce (there were 6,800 women employed as surface workers in Britain in 1874, 6.25 percent of the total).<sup>26</sup> By the turn of the century, their numbers were in decline. In 1890, there were just 732 women employed as surface

---

<sup>23</sup> Angela John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), pp. 74-75.

<sup>24</sup> Moffat, *My Life with the Miners*; Jack Lawson, *A Man's Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1944; repr. 1946).

<sup>25</sup> Mines and Collieries Act, 1842.

<sup>26</sup> John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, p. 71. This figure includes women surface workers from across coal, iron, shale and clay mines.

workers in South Wales, out of a total mining workforce for the region of 109,935.<sup>27</sup> By the middle of the twentieth century, women had largely ceased working on the surface; the mechanisation of the screening process, amongst other factors, had contributed to their gradual removal from the industry. John reports that the last two female surface workers were made redundant from their positions in the Cumberland coalfield in 1972.<sup>28</sup>

In the accounts of the South Wales coal miners, minework was universally recalled as men's work. Their childhood recollections of the roles undertaken by their fathers and mothers reveal a strict gendered division of labour within mining households in the region. Men undertook paid labour at the colliery in order to provide for their wives and children, whilst women were responsible for maintaining the home and caring for children, with some women also taking on paid work – usually within the home – or lodgers in order to supplement the household income. Typically, when miners did recall their mothers supplementing the main income, it was with labour that fit comfortably within the boundaries of women's gender roles. Will Paynter, born in Cardiff in 1903 and later President of the NUM (South Wales Area) (1951-1959) and General Secretary of the NUM (1959-1968), recalled his mother earning a 'small income' from taking in washing and ironing from local wealthy families.<sup>29</sup> Both Morgan, and Davies recalled that their mothers ran small shops from within their homes. In Davies' case, his mother also

---

<sup>27</sup> For women's employment statistics, see John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, p. 74. For size of the mining workforce in South Wales, see SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, Public Relations Department, 'The South Wales Coalfield: Annual Manpower and Saleable Output 1855-1946', [c. 1976].

<sup>28</sup> John, *By the Sweat on Their Brow*, p. 230.

<sup>29</sup> Will Paynter, *My Generation* (London: George Allen & Unwin), p. 12.

took in lodgers and his sister worked as a domestic servant.<sup>30</sup> In most cases, women took on paid labour when the male breadwinner had died, or when his earning potential was limited by workplace ill-health or disability. Paynter, for example, recalled his mother's paid employment in the context of his father losing an eye in a colliery accident.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Davies recalled that his mother took in lodgers and ran the shop in response to having 'four growing children, strong and healthy; four mouths to feed and four pairs of feet to be shod', whilst his father was unable to work following the colliery accident in which he broke his back.<sup>32</sup> In this way, the exceptional circumstances which often precipitated women's paid employment served to reinforce boys' understanding of the gender order: primary responsibility for the family's financial provision lay with the adult male members of the household so long as they were fit and able to work.

The recollections of miners working in other British coalfields suggest, however, that the presence of women colliery workers within the South Wales coalfield would have complicated boys' understanding of the prevailing gender order. Lawson, who was born in Whitehaven, Cumberland in 1881 and who later became the Labour MP for Chester-Le-Street, recalled an unnamed female colliery worker who regularly visited his childhood home:

She always impressed herself on my child mind as a "pitman", but I am told she never worked underground. She still, however, continued to work on the surface of the mine, driving a huge horse, riding astride it, whilst it pulled wagons to and fro on the surface railway ... She was more a man than a woman in both habit and appearance. She wore a cap, muffler, jacket, and waistcoat – and a skirt. She drank her pint and smoked a pipe.

---

<sup>30</sup> Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, p. 22; Davies, *In Search of Myself*, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Paynter, *My Generation*, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Davies, *In Search of Myself*, p. 22.

Her voice was mannish. Her face was masculine. Yet, manlike as she was in appearance and habit, she was still very much a woman, for she would fondle and clasp me to her in the way of a very tender and affectionate motherly person. I remember well how she turned fear of her to love, and how eagerly I looked forward to her visits. Perhaps it was the motherlove denied her which was finding expression. At any rate, I remember my childish anger when I heard the men around me joke and conduct themselves as though she was some uncouth man, for I knew she was a very gentle woman.<sup>33</sup>

These visits took place whilst the Lawson family lived in Kells, Cumberland, when Jack was between the ages of approximately one and seven years old. Lawson's decision to describe this woman and his relationship with her so many years later attests not only to the affection he felt towards her, but also his confusion at her physical appearance and occupational identity. To Lawson, this woman was an oxymoron. Her contradictory identity is captured in Lawson's descriptions; he first ascribed to her masculine habits and traits and then found ways to rebut them. He recalled, for example, that she wore traditionally masculine clothing, and also a skirt. His use of punctuation – the dash – serves to highlight the incongruity of her appearance. Even the job title which Lawson remembered ascribing to her whilst he was a child is a point of contention: Lawson thought of her as a "pitman" – its presentation in the text – the use of quotation marks – suggesting irony.

Despite the challenge Lawson perceived this woman to pose to his understanding of the gender order, he ultimately found ways to preserve its construction. Unable to account for her confusing occupational identity, Lawson's childhood self instead determined her femininity through the nurturing,

---

<sup>33</sup> Lawson, *A Man's Life*, p. 20.

affectionate behaviour she demonstrated towards him. Such affection was in contrast to the relationship Lawson had with his mother. Though Lawson described himself as proud of his mother for raising a family under challenging financial circumstances, he revealed her to be a frequently violent woman who was very rarely affectionate: 'Sometimes a gentle mood would come over her, and those rare moments of distant affection remain with me'.<sup>34</sup> In light of the affection he received from the family friend, Lawson struggled to reconcile his mother's behaviour with how he thought a 'motherly person' should behave. His mother was as much an oxymoron to him as the family friend was. In the absence of affection from his mother, displays of tenderness and care from the family friend appear to have solidified his perception of her femininity and sparked a desire to defend her 'gentle' nature from those who would treat her as an 'uncouth man'.<sup>35</sup>

Alongside the personal conclusions Lawson drew about his family friend, he also reveals that the preservation of the gender order within mining communities was more broadly dependent on the absence of women underground. Lawson's family friend could not be the 'pitman' he imagined her to be because she was only permitted to work on the surface. This distinction is one that Moffat also reveals in the details he provides about his family: his grandmother, mother, and wife all worked on the pithead.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, John's study of the Wigan coalfield found that women were typically only employed as colliery workers before marriage (or, in some instances, after being widowed).<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Lawson, *A Man's Life*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>35</sup> Lawson, *A Man's Life*, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Moffat, *My Life with the Miners*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>37</sup> John, *By the Sweat on Their Brow*, pp. 116-118.

This was similarly the case elsewhere; Moffat's wife worked on the pithead only until their marriage, at which point she ceased undertaking paid work.<sup>38</sup> This combination of legislation and social norms played a large role in shaping the gendered patterns of work within the coalfields. It was as a consequence of these factors that boys in mining communities across Britain grew up with the understanding that minework – specifically, that undertaken underground – was men's work.

Whilst the subterranean environment was maintained as a purely masculine world, miners' childhood homes were frequently recalled as feminised spaces where much of women's work was centred. Morgan, for example, grew up in a household with his parents, grandmother and three sisters. His older sisters were frequently charged with his care and entertainment, and his grandmother and mother shared the household work between them: '[Grandmother] was a considerable help to my mother who had a coal-mining husband, four children and a small shop to look after'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Jack Jones, born into an impoverished mining family in Merthyr Tydfil in 1884, recalled his mother being helped with childcare and household tasks by his grandmother who lived in a house 'around the back' of his own.<sup>40</sup> Laura King, in her study of fatherhood in the period 1914-1960, finds that the closest and most affectionate parent-child relationship was often between mother and child.<sup>41</sup> As we have already seen with Lawson's recollections, however, a good relationship between mother and child was not

---

<sup>38</sup> Moffat, *My Life with the Miners*, p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, p. 22.

<sup>40</sup> Jones, *Unfinished Journey*, p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> Laura King, *Family Men: Fatherhood & Masculinity in Britain, 1914-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 106-110. See particularly, p. 109.

guaranteed; individual family dynamics were a significant factor in determining closeness and affection.<sup>42</sup> In most of the autobiographical accounts explored for this study, miners tended towards recalling their childhood home and familial relationships with fondness. G. A. W. Tomlinson, a Nottinghamshire miner born circa 1906, described his home and his mother's presence in nostalgic terms:

Our home was sparsely furnished ... It was surprisingly comfortable though. I have been in many much more expensively furnished houses that were far less comfortable. When the long miserable winter nights were upon us Mother would pull the old sofa up to the fire and tell us the old stories which have delighted the hearts of countless children, whilst deep down in the earth my father laboured away to provide us with the necessities of life.<sup>43</sup>

The description of old furniture, which the reader might expect to act as signifiers of poverty, are instead remembered as familiar and comforting. The image he paints of the fireside stories suggest a warm and nurturing relationship between himself and his mother. He also notes his father's absence and the contribution he made to family life as the financial provider. For Tomlinson, his comfortable childhood home is maintained on two fronts: by his mother's domestic and emotional labour inside the home; and by his father's financial provision for the family which required his presence away from the home.

The schedule of the colliery played a large role in determining the rhythms of family life. Long hours at the colliery meant that the presence of miners within

---

<sup>42</sup> Lawson, *A Man's Life*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>43</sup> G. A. W. Tomlinson, *Coal Miner* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1937), pp. 22-23.

the home was concentrated into specific times.<sup>44</sup> The routine of miners preparing to leave for the start of the shift and their return after a day's work feature across many of the autobiographies of those who grew up in mining communities. Such routines conveyed something of the nature of mining labour to boys who had yet to begin working in the industry themselves. Morgan, for example, whose mining pedigree we explored earlier, recalled in great detail the habits of his father following his return from work:

When my father arrived home from the pit I was often in the kitchen ready to greet him. His black, dusty appearance ... filled the doorway as he entered. The whites of his eyes seemed to glitter in his coal black face ...

When he peeled off his shirt and vest to wash the upper part of his body, he looked to me then a giant, muscular and with great strength and toughness ... I can remember the raw patches and cuts on his back ... My father seemed to take little notice of these inconveniences. He accepted them as a natural part of his trade.<sup>45</sup>

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, facilities for washing and changing were not provided at colliery sites. It was only after the Mining Industry Act, 1920 required the establishment of a Miners' Welfare Fund (in which one penny was levied against each tonne of coal produced) that pithead baths began to be built at collieries across Britain.<sup>46</sup> Before this, miners left work in their dirty pit

---

<sup>44</sup> John Gillis has identified the concentration of the time men spent in the home as a broader trend in working-class family practices which emerged as a result of industry being increasingly located outside of the home. See John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), pp. 179-200.

<sup>45</sup> Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, pp. 16-18.

<sup>46</sup> For discussion of the Miners Welfare Fund, including its key features and the circumstances surrounding its creations, see W. John Morgan, 'The Miners' Welfare Fund in Britain 1920-1952', *Social Policy & Administration*, 24. 3 (1990), pp. 199-211. The fund was established based on the recommendations in the report of the Sankey Commission. See *Coal Industry Commission Act, 1919. Interim Report by the Honourable Mr. Justice Sankey, G.B.E.*, (London: HMSO, 1919) Cmd. 84, pp. 7-8.

clothes and washed at home. The physical presence of the miner's body in the home – his appearance, his clothes, his posture – ensured that children in mining households grew up with an awareness of the dirty and physically demanding nature of mining labour. Through his observations of his father, Morgan gained an implicit understanding of miners' embodied masculinity – of the strength developed and expended in the process of winning the coal. For Morgan, this strength coupled with his father's stoicism when dealing with physical discomfort and pain were traits to be admired and emulated: 'Years later,' he said, 'I too ... felt the same kind of inconveniences and learnt to accept them in the same nonchalant way as my father'.<sup>47</sup>

Whilst Morgan recalled these daily routines with fondness, and ascribed positive feeling to the masculine traits his father embodied, others ascribed a very different emotive experience to similar routines. Tomlinson, the Nottinghamshire miner whose nostalgic memories of home we explored earlier, remembered the weekly routine surrounding his father's return on payday. Tomlinson's romanticised view of his family home – of his mother telling him stories whilst sitting on the sofa in front of the fire – stands in contrast to the reality of witnessing his parents fret over money.

Father would come home from the pit on Friday thick with coal dust, clothes sodden with sweat, slump down into a chair, all the grand strength of which I was so proud and of which I used to boast to other children, drained from him. At the same time he would throw his wages on the table with "That's all there is this week, lass." Always it was the same remark, as if *that* was all this

---

<sup>47</sup> Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, p. 18.

week: but it might be more next. It never was more the next week.<sup>48</sup>

Within the private confines of the home, Tomlinson repeatedly witnessed the contradictory effects of mining labour on the male body – its ability to both strengthen and fatigue. Tomlinson could not positively interpret dirt, sweat, and tiredness when it was accompanied by financial concern. His recollections suggest that, as a boy, he had implicitly understood the vulnerability of masculinity constituted through waged labour – his father had exhausted himself at work and yet still struggled to adequately fulfil the requirements of the breadwinner role. Similarly, Tomlinson appears to have recognised that his father’s exhaustion threatened to erode his embodied masculinity; the strength that Tomlinson boasted of his father possessing is recalled here in direct contrast to the exhaustion at the end of a week of work.

Beyond awareness of the wear-and-tear of colliery work on miners’ bodies, miners’ recollections reveal that the daily routines in their childhood homes contributed to their awareness of mining as dangerous, even deadly, work. Lawson, the Cumberland miner who fondly remembered the woman surface worker who regularly visited his childhood home, recalled how his mother always rose from bed to see her husband and sons off to work:

... mother would rise with my father at three in the morning, get breakfast for him, and see him out to work ... In later years we tried to persuade her not to get up, but it was useless. To her it was unthinkable that we should go to work while she was in bed. She never said why, but we knew what it was in the back of her mind. It was the old law of the colliery woman urging her to see

---

<sup>48</sup> Tomlinson, *Coal Miner*, p. 43.

us out – for it might be the last she would see of us. It is not wise, but it is womanly, and is based on grim, sad experience.<sup>49</sup>

Lawson perceived his mother's behaviour – which was part of the family routine long before Lawson himself began work at the pit – to be part of the broader pattern of gendered roles within his family home. Men had little choice but to accept the risk to their own life, whilst women bore the emotional burden of waiting and hoping for their safe return. His mother's care and concern were therefore befitting of her 'womanly' status. Lawson reveals that his mother managed this uncertainty through her own commitment to her husband's and sons' wellbeing. The connotations pertaining to the 'old law of the colliery woman' are interesting here. It is possible that Lawson thought his mother was engaging in a superstitious attempt to protect his father from harm by seeing him off to work each morning. On the other hand, he may simply have meant that staying in bed was unimaginable to his mother, because of her deeply ingrained sense of her gendered role within the household. Regardless, by placing his mother within a long line of colliery women, his reflections speak once again to the significance of a mining heritage to boys' perceptions of their masculinity and working identity.

The frequency with which reference to the dangers of mining appeared in mining autobiographies is noted by W.S. Howard, who identifies a 'recurrent preoccupation with occupational danger' as one of several characteristics common across the majority of texts in the sub-genre.<sup>50</sup> As in Lawson's account,

---

<sup>49</sup> Lawson, *A Man's Life*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>50</sup> W.S. Howard, 'Miners' Autobiography: Text and Context', *Labour History Review*, 60. 2 (1995), pp. 89-98 (p. 90).

the theme of occupational danger often first appeared in the sections of miners' autobiographies concerned with childhood – that is, the portion of the authors' lives when their knowledge of occupational danger did not stem from their own mining labour. Narratives of personal loss, even in childhood, are common in the autobiographies. This is hardly surprising given the high number of fatalities within the mining workforce. Between 1880 and 1930, deaths in the mining industry rarely fell below 1,000 per year.<sup>51</sup> In 1921 and 1926 recorded deaths fell to 759 and 649 respectively. This temporary drop in the number of deaths can be ascribed to the national coal lockouts which took place in these years. When reflecting on the consequences of the 1926 lockout in his autobiography, Arthur Horner stated, 'At that time we were losing twelve hundred men a year killed in the coalfields, so one could calculate that seven hundred men were alive at the end of the strike who would have been dead had it not been called, and tens of thousands escaped injury'.<sup>52</sup> In addition to annual fatalities, injuries and industrial disease were commonplace. The Royal Commission on the Coal Industry (1925) (Samuel Commission) offered the following assessment of the risks associated with mining:

At present rates of accident and disease, therefore, it may be expected that in twenty years, among the hundred men, two will be killed, nine will suffer fracture of the head or limb or other serious injury, eight will contract nystagmus [a condition of involuntary eye movement], and eight more "beat hand, knee or elbow or inflammation of the wrist," a total of 27 out of the hundred who will suffer at one time or other from these more serious dangers. In addition, there will be among them during the period 353 cases of comparatively minor accidents, each

---

<sup>51</sup> Department of Employment, *British Labour Statistics, Historical Abstract* (1971), table 200, pp. 399-400.

<sup>52</sup> Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1960), p. 90.

disabling, however, for a period of more than seven days; that is to say, that each of the men on average will incur an accident of that character about once in six years.<sup>53</sup>

The prevalence of such incidents meant that all those who grew up in mining households at the turn of the century possessed at least an abstract knowledge of the dangers of minework. For many others, however, this knowledge was based on tragic personal experience.

Of the nine South Wales miners' autobiographies examined here, four came from families where one or more of the mining men had suffered serious injury, disablement, or death in the mines. As already mentioned, Paynter's father lost one of his eyes whilst working underground, and a fall of coal broke Davies' father's back, leaving him unable to work for almost a decade.<sup>54</sup> Another fall of coal killed Edwards' father before he was born.<sup>55</sup> Arthur Horner, who was born in Merthyr Tydfil, South Wales in 1894 and went to become a leading member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, President of the SWMF (1936-1946), and General Secretary of the NUM (1946-1959), also recalled a number of tragedies that befell his family during his childhood years:

Then one Sunday, somebody left a ventilator door open in the Glynmeal Level, and my grandfather, going in at evening to examine the pit, was blown to pieces by an explosion. They collected his remains with a rake, and brought them home in a sack ... My uncle worked in the mines until his back was broken by a fall of roof. Another uncle went nearly blind with nystagmus. I learned very early that there was blood on the coal.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry (1925)*, (London: HMSO, 1926) Cmd. 2600, p. 192.

<sup>54</sup> Paynter, *My Generation*, pp. 11-12; Davies, *In Search of Myself*, p. 21.

<sup>55</sup> Edwards, *From the Valley I Came*, p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel*, p. 11.

Horner's account of his grandfather's death is graphic but brief – a matter-of-fact approach perhaps intended to imitate the shock of the event. This element of shock is further emphasised by Horner's recollection that the event occurred 'one Sunday' – an otherwise ordinary day. Horner's clipped style, which continues throughout his explanations of his uncles' conditions, is indicative of the bitterness he felt at the impact the coal industry had had on his family. This bitterness is more explicitly expressed when Horner spoke of the lesson he learnt from these tragedies as a child – 'there was blood on the coal'. It is worth briefly noting the similarities this expression shares with a metaphor used by Moffat – the Scottish miner whose mother and grandmother had worked on the pithead – when he described his mining heritage: 'coal was in my blood'.<sup>57</sup> Taken together, these two poignant statements capture something of the symbiotic relationship that existed between the coal industry and mining communities in the late-nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Minework was the lynch pin of identity for miners, their families, and their communities, but it equally had the capacity to destroy men's bodies and their capacity to work. This was something that boys like Horner – from a multi-generational mining family that had experienced more than its fair share of tragedy – knew only too well.

A comparison of South Wales miners' autobiographies alongside their counterparts from other parts of the British coalfields reveals that geography influenced the type of pit danger that miners recalled being aware of as children.

---

<sup>57</sup> Moffat, *My Life with the Miners*, p. 9.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Some dangers were common to all coalfields. Edwards, for example, described the roof fall that killed his father in the South Wales coalfield as 'a common enough accident in all mines' at the time.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Jim Bullock, born in Yorkshire in 1903 and later President of the British Association of Colliery Management (BACM), had an older brother who was killed in a similar accident in July 1911 when Jim was eight years old: 'I had heard often, even at that age, of other boys' brothers and fathers being killed at the pit, but now it had really come home, for this was *my* brother, it had happened to *my* family'.<sup>59</sup> The act of visiting his brother's grave served to repeatedly remind Bullock of the nature of his death: 'his tombstone was made of pieces of roughly cemented stones all put together to resemble a fall of muck'.<sup>60</sup>

Other dangers, however, were more prevalent in some coalfields than others. Nearly all of the accounts that discuss the disabling effects of dust come from those who lived and worked in the South Wales coalfield.<sup>61</sup> Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston's research on dust disease amongst British miners can be called upon to provide an explanation for this regional variation in the types of danger recalled: South Wales had the largest community of miners disabled through pneumoconiosis in the early to mid-twentieth century.<sup>62</sup> In no other coalfield were boys so frequently exposed to the slow, disabling and all-to-often deadly impact of

---

<sup>58</sup> Edwards, *From the Valley I Came*, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Jim Bullock, *Them and Us* (London: Souvenir Press, 1972), p. 179.

<sup>60</sup> Jim Bullock, *Bowers Row: Recollections of a Mining Village* (Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1976), p. 178.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, p. 222; Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel*, p. 11. Dust disease is also briefly mentioned in Bullock, *Bowers Row*, p. 177.

<sup>62</sup> McIvor and Johnston, *Miners' Lung*, pp. 56-57.

dust inhalation. When recalling his childhood, Horner described death, disablement, and dust disease as an ever-looming presence:

Above all I felt the shadows of the pits. Today, we have secured great advances in safety measures, but the fear of sudden death or mutilation still hangs over the miners and is felt in every mining village. In my childhood it was even more dominant and always with us were the men with the deadly dust in their lungs, waiting only for death.<sup>63</sup>

A sense of helplessness in the face of an unavoidable horror is pervasive in these memories, with Horner remembering dust-afflicted miners hovering like spectres over his childhood. The mention of improved safety measures nods towards Horner's involvement in shaping safety legislation – the Mines and Quarries Act, 1954 – through his national leadership position on the NUM. Fatalities in the coal industry had been trending downwards since the 1930s. When Horner published his autobiography in 1960, a year after his retirement, fatalities recorded that year had fallen to 317.<sup>64</sup> Despite this improvement, coal mining was still one of the most dangerous industries to work in; the fatality figure for 1960 represented 24.2% of all workplace deaths required to be recorded by government legislation.<sup>65</sup> These deaths were also experienced by a significantly diminished workforce. From a peak of 1,191,000 men in 1920, employment in the British coal industry had fallen to 607,000 (or 51 percent of the 1920 figure) in 1960.<sup>66</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that

---

<sup>63</sup> Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel*, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> Department of Employment, *British Labour Statistics, Historical Abstract 1886-1968* (London: HMSO, 1971), table 200, pp. 398-399. The 317 fatalities include just those deaths recorded in the coal industry. Prior to the introduction of the Mines and Quarries Act, 1954, deaths in coal mines were counted alongside deaths in other mining industries. Deaths in these other industries were usually minimal; in 1960 the number of fatalities recorded was 1.

<sup>65</sup> Calculated based on statistics sourced from Department of Employment, *British Labour Statistics*, pp. 398-399.

<sup>66</sup> Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Historical Coal Data*.

Horner identified the same feeling of fear amongst mining villages in 1960 as he experienced as a child at the turn of the century.

Oftentimes, boys' recollections of the deaths of miners, their disablement and workplace related ill-health, were accompanied by memories of the community response to these circumstances. Walter Haydn Davies<sup>67</sup> autobiography opens with his memories of making his way home from school and encountering a procession of miners who were carrying his father home following the stroke he suffered at work:

...I realised that some kind of procession was coming along ... I was just in time to see the vanguard rounding the corner some distance away, a formation of miners two abreast. Instantly I realised they were carrying a fellow worker home from the colliery on a stretcher, for at given intervals four miners stepped out to take their turn at sharing the burden of carrying the load.<sup>68</sup>

As Walter recalled elsewhere, these processions were a common sight in mining communities at the turn of the century, though typically they occurred when a man was killed underground and the body could be recovered.<sup>69</sup> The nature of fatalities in the coal industry meant that recoveries of this nature were not always possible, as was the case with Horner's grandfather, discussed above, who was killed in an explosion.<sup>70</sup> The militaristic language Walter used to describe the front of this procession – 'the vanguard' – is worthy of note. This was a term often associated

---

<sup>67</sup> Walter Haydn Davies is referred to by his first name throughout in order to avoid confusion with D. R. Davies.

<sup>68</sup> Walter Haydn Davies, *The Right Place, The Right Time* (Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1975), p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> Davies, *The Right Place, The Right Time*, p. 16. See also Edwards, *From the Valley I Came*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>70</sup> Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel*, p. 11.

with the South Wales miners, their union, and its position within the trade union movement.<sup>71</sup> Given that Walter was only eight when his father suffered the stroke, it is unlikely that this is language he would have ascribed to these events at the time. His word choice speaks instead to the significance he attributed to this memory at the point of writing – a significance which is emphasised by the prominent position he afforded this memory in the text. It appears that Walter wanted to present this event as emblematic of the character of mining communities – an environment where mutual support acted as a bulwark against the hardships and threats the community faced. When Walter realised that the man being carried was his father, he walked home ‘in the procession of miners’ with one hand on the stretcher.<sup>72</sup> This recollection of joining the procession served to position Walter as someone who both embraced the community’s commitment to collectivism from childhood and benefitted from their support.

Historians have noted that the spirit of collectivism that existed within coal mining communities had regional variations. In their study of disability and working-class mutualism, Ben Curtis and Steven Thompson explore the formal efforts of the working-class movement to provide assistance to disabled miners. They conclude that disabled miners were placed ‘at the heart of the labour movement’s activities’ in South Wales by conscious decision.<sup>73</sup> This was a result that emerged, in large part, due to the interest taken in this matter by the SWMF, and the work of medical aid societies which were more robust in South Wales than

---

<sup>71</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*; Curtis and Thompson, “‘A Plentiful Crop of Cripples Made by All This Progress’: Disability, Artificial Limbs and Working-Class Mutualism in the South Wales Coalfield, 1890-1948’, *Social History of Medicine*, 27. 4 (2014), pp. 708-727 (p. 712).

<sup>72</sup> Davies, *The Right Place, The Right Time*, p. 17.

<sup>73</sup> Curtis and Thompson, “‘A Plentiful Crop of Cripples’”, *Social History of Medicine*, p. 726.

elsewhere in the country.<sup>74</sup> Walter's childhood recollections indicate that these formal activities existed alongside an informal culture of providing extended care and support to miners' and their families facing difficult circumstances. His father's illness stretched on for several months before his eventual death in the family home. Throughout this period, his father and family were supported by numerous people in the community. His father was rarely left alone in his sickbed:

With pride I recall how two different fellow-miners sat by my father's bed side at night-time during his long and trying illness ... They knew it could well be their turn of misfortune next, and this thought prompted them to share the common burden that was part of a mining community's lot.<sup>75</sup>

The actions of his father's workmates served to further impress upon Walter the community's commitment to collectivism and mutual support. These were values and behaviours that Walter came to deeply respect. His recollections demonstrate that boys who grew up in mining families and communities understood that being a miner in the South Wales coalfield meant not only accepting personal risk, but also committing to the collective mitigation and management of the dangers and hardships the mining community endured.

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, this commitment to collectivism found formal expression through the miners' union: first the SWMF and later then NUM. Unionism, however, features only sporadically in the portion of the autobiographies that South Wales miners allocated to their recollections of childhood. This is perhaps an issue of chronology; when most of these miners

---

<sup>74</sup> Curtis and Thompson, "A Plentiful Crop of Cripples", *Social History of Medicine*, p. 713.

<sup>75</sup> Davies, *The Right Place, The Right Time*, p. 19.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

were boys the SWMF was in its infancy having been founded in 1898 as a response to the South Wales miners' defeat in the strike of the same year. Whilst unionism was rarely the topic of discussion, industrial disputes were a common feature of childhood recollections. Edwards, whose father was killed underground before he was born, was ten years old at the time of the 1898 strike. He recalled watching the striking miners marching through their valley with the aim of reaching the home of one of the coal owners, who they hoped would meet a deputation of the men. He recalled how the women and children of the villages 'rushed to their gates or doorways' to bring food and drink to the men as they marched through the village:

Under the stone table in the pantry at our back door were three dozen bottles of my mother's small beer. My mother and I carried them all to the front step and handed them to the men.

As refreshment this was perhaps not very much; but the women gave of their all. It was the brotherhood of the poor.<sup>76</sup>

Edwards' recollections demonstrate that boys' understanding of collectivism extended beyond a response to the dangers of the mine, but to conditions of economic hardship. Kinship was demonstrated between the people of the mining community through the act of sharing their limited resources. Also notable within Edwards' recollections of the strike is the way in which participation in collective action was determined along gendered lines; men could take direct action to protest working conditions and pay, and women responded to these actions with demonstrations of support that fit within their role as housewives and mothers – providing food and refreshment for the 'weary' miners.<sup>77</sup> As a child not yet

---

<sup>76</sup> Edwards, *From the Valley I Came*, p. 37.

<sup>77</sup> Edwards, *From the Valley I Came*, p. 37.

employed in the mines, Edwards could only model his mother's behaviour and observe the men as they made their way through the valley.

Like Edwards, Jones – who grew up in the insect-ridden slums of Merthyr Tydfil – also recalled the miners' strike of 1898. Jones was fourteen at the time and had already begun working at the coal face with his father. The strike was to last for six months and, with the loss of two wages, caused considerable financial hardship for the family. In an attempt to alleviate the hunger experienced by the family, Jones and his mother walked twice a week over the mountains into the wealthier areas of the Monmouthshire valleys to sell strike ballad sheets door-to-door. This was initially the cause of some friction between his mother, who was determined to go, and his father, who was adamant that she should not. He recalled one quarrel in which his father said, "...I'd rather starve than you should go from door to door, begging ...". At his mother's continued insistence that she would sell the ballad sheets, his father grew increasingly irate:

"An' I'll stay home to look after the house, I suppose?"

"Blodwen can see to everything till I get back; you can go an' scrat a bag of coal up the tip to sell for a bit of meat..."

...[mother continues] All these children's bellies are asking me to do something. What do you know? You're out of the house most of the time, but I'm here with 'em from morning to night, an' it's to me they turns for everything, it's to me they run for a cut off the loaf – an it's me that's settling the matter..."<sup>78</sup>

Though Jones and his mother were successful in selling the ballads and improving the family's circumstances during the strike, Jones recalls that his father was never

---

<sup>78</sup> Jones, *Unfinished Journey*, pp. 82-83.

‘thankful’ for their efforts.<sup>79</sup> Jones recalls this as an issue of wounded pride – his mother’s insistence on selling the ballad sheets door-to-door meant admitting publicly that the family was experiencing financial hardship and that his father was temporarily unable to fulfil the role of the male breadwinner. Jones, still young and living within his parents’ household, makes no mention of personally involving himself in the argument between his parents and appears to have been content to defer to his mother’s wish that he accompany her. Jones’ recollections also indicate that his father’s disapproval stemmed, in part, from a perceived breakdown of the gender order. His father questioned whether he would be expected to take on the responsibilities of maintaining the home whilst his mother was attempting to earn money outside of it. The solution proposed by his mother ultimately worked to preserve his father’s relationship with the home: she determined that household responsibilities would be placed in the care of their eldest daughter, whilst pointing to a way in which her husband could simultaneously contribute to the household finances and maintain his elastic relationship with the home.

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the suffering experienced by miners, their families and the broader community could impress upon boys something of the nature of mining labour – its exhausting, deleterious effects – and the significance of collectivism and mutual support. Whilst widespread, hardship, privation, and the impact of injuries and bereavement were not universally experienced. Morgan’s recollections of his family life during childhood are notably

---

<sup>79</sup> Jones, *Unfinished Journey*, p. 83.

free of these afflictions. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that his childhood perception of the colliery environment is amongst the most idealised in all of the South Wales miners' autobiographies; as a boy he imagined the colliery to be a 'mysterious and attractive place' – an 'Aladdin's cave with fairy lights'.<sup>80</sup> Though his fascination prompted him to ask his father many questions about the industry, his fantastical perception of the colliery environment persisted until he joined the mining workforce.<sup>81</sup> Of the first time he walked to work alongside his father, Morgan reflected:

That walk led me out of my childhood into a dark world of work, work that was sometimes brutal, dangerous work, but to me at this time, my first day, it was a romantic adventure, an excursion into the Aladdin's Cave of a boy's dream. My father was beside me and he was what I wanted to be, a miner. I walked eagerly, lightheartedly towards the pit gates.<sup>82</sup>

Morgan's description reveals the importance of transition points in the lifecycle, and how they could impact on miners' perceptions of their own masculinity. Here, Morgan's repetition of his earlier description of the imagined colliery environment – the 'Aladdin's cave' – is contrasted with his memories of the 'dark', 'brutal' and 'dangerous' reality of working life underground. This contrast emphasises that his introduction to minework functioned as a watershed moment – the point at which he was finally disabused of his childhood fantasies. Present within this text are both Morgan the child, who entered the mines with excitement and in search of adventure, and Morgan the adult, who reflected sympathetically on the naivety of

---

<sup>80</sup> Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, p. 16.

<sup>81</sup> Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>82</sup> Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, p. 63.

his younger self. Bridging the distance between these two versions of himself is the first walk to the colliery gates, recalled by Morgan as the transition point between boyhood and manhood.

Morgan was not alone in explicitly recalling his first day of work at the colliery as a key marker of transition between boyhood and manhood. Jones, who had sold the ballad sheets with his mother during the 1898 strike, left school at the age of twelve and immediately joined the industry. When recounting this story, he reflected on what starting work had meant to him at that point in his life:

I shall be a man, wearing long trousers, working in the pit with dad, sitting down to taters an' meat every night with dad, having pocket-money on Saturday nights same as dad, pocket-money to spend as I like. I can buy Cinderella cigarettes – ay, an' beer if I want it ... I would go about in long trousers with other working chaps ... not with our mam and the children now. With working chaps.<sup>83</sup>

As already noted, masculinity is rarely the explicit topic of discussion in miners' personal testimonies. In recalling this moment of transition between boyhood and manhood, Jones provides a rare opportunity to assess his explicit understanding of what it meant to be a man in a mining community. Pit work granted Jones access to a masculine world and experiences previously denied to him. The markers of manhood that he listed reveal where he perceived masculinity to be located – the body, the pit, the dinner table within the home, and amongst other men when at leisure. This understanding was modelled on his observations of his father's behaviours and experiences. Jones' recollections are also striking because of their inherently childlike quality: his excitement at the prospect of financial

---

<sup>83</sup> Jones, *Unfinished Journey*, p. 67.

independence only to purchase cigarettes and alcohol, his wish to distance himself from his mother, and the continued deference and adoration of his father evident in the ways Jones wished to imitate him. This is what masculinity meant to Jones not at the point of writing, but as a twelve-year-old. As such, Jones' recollections serve to emphasise the drawn-out nature of the transition between boyhood and manhood. Though Jones at the time may have felt differently, the start of work did not signify the abrupt achievement of manhood, but rather the beginning of the transition out of boyhood and towards the adult stage of the miners' lifecycle. The transitional stages between boyhood and manhood as experienced by boys working underground are explored further in the next chapter.

The first day of work, particularly the first descent into a pit, was a commonly told narrative in miners' autobiographies. These recollections function, as Howard argues, as a means of revealing to the outside world the realities of the subterranean environment.<sup>84</sup> When recalling these early experiences underground, miners frequently also reflected upon the circumstances which led them to employment within the coal industry. Morgan joined the coal industry as soon as he completed his period of compulsory education. This was a decision which went against his parents' wishes.

Both my parents were against me entering the pit, especially my father, but such work seemed quite natural to me. I had nothing else in mind and there was little else in the way of employment in our valley. I had no interest in staying on at school, although I was never bored with lessons ... I wanted to enter the pit and I pestered my father to let me become a miner. He finally relented and his remarks were: "Remember this is your choice. It'll be hard, back-aching work and I don't want any grousing when

---

<sup>84</sup> Howard, 'Miners' Autobiography', *Labour History Review*, p. 90.

you're down there". My mother was worried, as well as disappointed at my choice, but she accepted it in the end as being inevitable.<sup>85</sup>

Here Morgan clearly frames his transition from school to working life as a process over which he had some agency. Working underground was an active choice – something which he had looked forward to throughout his childhood. This element of choice is confirmed by his parents' failed attempts to dissuade him. His father's remarks perhaps stemmed from an awareness of Morgan's fascination with the industry and his unrealistic perception of the nature of minework. Despite Morgan's eagerness to become a miner, his recollections also indicate that he understood his options outside of the coal industry to be limited. His mother's eventual acceptance that minework was 'inevitable' can be read as both an acceptance of Morgan's personal interest in the industry and of the industrial and economic reality of the area in which they lived.

Morgan was not alone in recalling a personal sense of agency with regard to starting work in the coal industry. Davies also reflected in his autobiography that it took him several weeks to convince his mother to allow him to work at the pit.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Paynter recalled being 'hell-bent on leaving school and starting work' – his first job in the coal industry was as a collier's assistant, a position he took after leaving school at the age of thirteen.<sup>87</sup> In large numbers, however, both the autobiographies and oral testimonies of South Wales coal miners attest to the inescapable pull of the collieries in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth

---

<sup>85</sup> Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, p. 62.

<sup>86</sup> Davies, *In Search of Myself*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>87</sup> Paynter, *My Generation*, p. 18.

centuries.<sup>88</sup> John Evans, who was born in 1901 and started working in the mines in 1915 on his fourteenth birthday, recalled how minework was ‘all that was in front of everybody at that time’.<sup>89</sup> Just shy of twenty years later, Gwilym Williams found the employment situation to be similarly limited: ‘there was nothing else left for us when we left school but to go to the mines’.<sup>90</sup> For years, education offered boys the only real prospect of escaping the clutches of the coal industry. Paynter writes in his autobiography that his parents ‘would have made it possible’ for him to stay on at school if it was what he had wanted, despite the fact that ‘additional money into the family purse was always needed and welcomed’.<sup>91</sup> For others, however, passing the grammar school examination was still no guarantee of a future outside of the coal industry. This was the case for John Williams who grew up in Banwen, a small mining community at the top of the Dulais Valley. His hopes for attending grammar school were quashed by poverty: ‘...we couldn’t afford it. I was straight underground’.<sup>92</sup> Larger families often relied on the wages of their eldest sons to supplement the household income.<sup>93</sup> As these additional wages improved the

---

<sup>88</sup> Paynter, *My Generation*, p. 18; Edwards, *From the Valley I Came*, p. 39; Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, p. 62; SWML, AUD/390, John Evans, interviewed by George Ewart Evans, c. 1960-1979; SWML, AUD/265, Gwilym Williams, interviewed by Hywel Francis, 17 May 1974; SWML, AUD/150, Edward George Pritchard, interviewed by Kim Howells, 7 May 1980; SWML, AUD/233, Mr and Mrs Ivan Rosser & M. M. Morgan interviewed by Alun Morgan, 27 March 1974; SWML, AUD/288, John Williams, interviewed by Hywel Francis, 23 July 1974; SWML, AUD/101, Haydn Morgan Harrison, interviewed by Kim Howells, 3 March 1981. Miners from across Britain’s coalfields similarly attested to the pull of the colliery, with many following in the footsteps of older relatives. See, for example, Tom Ellis, *Mines and Men: Mining Engineering* (Reading: Educational Explorers, 1971), pp. 11-12; Einion Evans, *Nearly a Miner* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1994), pp. 136-137; Moffat, *My Life with the Miners*, p. 16; George Hitchin, *Pit Yacker* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), pp. 57-59; Bullock, *Bowers Row*, p. 184; Bob Smith, *Seven Steps in the Dark: A Miner’s Life* (Ayrshire: Luath Press, 1991), p. 35.

<sup>89</sup> SWML, AUD/390, John Evans.

<sup>90</sup> SWML, AUD/265, Gwilym Williams.

<sup>91</sup> Paynter, *My Generation*, p. 18.

<sup>92</sup> SWML, AUD/288, John Williams.

<sup>93</sup> SWML, AUD/390, John Evans.

family's finances, younger siblings might hope – often in vain – to avoid the mines. Haydn Harrison was the youngest in his family; he recalled that his 'mother's ambition was that I would never go into the pit ... But unfortunately, circumstances prevented that, and I had to go into the pits like my brothers'.<sup>94</sup> In these circumstances, the personal preferences of the boys themselves – and/or their parents – counted for very little; boys' futures were constrained by a combination of their family's financial circumstances and the industrial geography of the region.

The experience of poverty was often a factor which underpinned boys' motivations for leaving school and joining the mining workforce. Edwards, who had grown up without his father because of a fatal colliery accident, recalled how his family's precarious financial situation worsened when he was about eight years old. At this time, the second of his two brothers (who were much older than him) married and moved out of the family home: 'my mother, my sister Eliza and I were left to fend for ourselves'.<sup>95</sup> Four years later, Edwards was anxious to start work so that he could alleviate the poverty they were enduring.

I was growing fast, and I was well aware that my clothes and boots were costing my mother more and more. Not that she ever complained; it was merely that I saw the grim need to relieve her of part of her burden. I would be able to do this when once [sic] I started work. But there was one hurdle before me as my birthday approached: before I would be permitted to work, I must pass the Labour Examination ... if I failed, an alarming prospect to me then, it would mean another year's struggle for my mother without any help from me.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> SWML, AUD/101, Haydn Morgan Harrison.

<sup>95</sup> Edwards, *From the Valley I Came*, p. 27.

<sup>96</sup> Edwards, *From the Valley I Came*, p. 39.

At about this time, Edwards also started to spend time with older boys who already worked in the industry. They shared stories with him about the colliery, including ‘the usual picturesque and heroic trimmings which appeal to all boys’.<sup>97</sup> Whilst Edwards was not immune to curiosity about the underground environment, these ‘trimmings’ feature in his recollections only as passing fancies. Unlike Morgan, his desire to start work had little to do with a sense of adventure, or a desire to emulate his older mining relatives, but instead was born out of necessity. The burden of responsibility is evident in his recollections, particularly in relation to his performance in the examination which – if he passed – would grant him a certificate confirming that he had reached the required educational standard to leave school. Edwards, too, understood leaving school and starting work as a key moment of transition between boyhood and manhood. For him, however, his perception of what it meant to be a man in a mining community was not measured by markers of status – long trousers, dinners shared with older male relatives, time spent with ‘working chaps’ – but, rather, by his assumption of the breadwinner role and his ability to provide for his mother and sister.

This chapter set out to consider what miners’ recollections of childhood could reveal about the formation of their masculine and occupational identities. In doing so, it demonstrates that miners viewed their childhood experiences as formative to their understanding of what it meant to be a man in a South Wales mining community. As part of the process of composing a coherent life narrative, miners selected for inclusion memories of their childhood which emphasised both

---

<sup>97</sup> Edwards, *From the Valley I Came*, p. 39.

their personal and familial relationship with the coal industry, and their knowledge of the nature of minework. The significance of a mining childhood to boys' identity formation is underscored by the attempts of those with no prior connection to the industry to compose a life narrative which referenced some kind of affective relationship with the coal industry during childhood. Many miners also set their own lives and childhood experiences within the historical context of their family heritage. In doing so, they revealed that they perceived their mining identity to span across their life and not merely the portion of the lifecycle in which they were employed in the industry. Put another way, for miners who grew up in mining households, personal perceptions of their masculinity and working identity were forged even before they began work in the pit.

This chapter has also shed light on what miners learnt of the industry, and of masculinity and working identity as a consequence of growing up in a mining household. The South Wales miners who wrote autobiographies universally understood minework to be men's work. The gendered division of labour within boys' homes, and across the coalfield more broadly, instilled from an early age an understanding of the responsibilities of the male breadwinner. Miners' recollections similarly suggest a widespread understanding amongst children in mining households of the dirty and physically demanding nature of mining labour. This chapter has also revealed, however, that there were factors which led to divergence across the accounts of the South Wales miners in terms of their boyhood knowledge of the industry and understanding of masculinity. This was most evident in miners' recollections of family bereavements or grievous injuries and disablement as a result of accidents in the colliery. The extent to which boys

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

were forced to confront the fragility of masculinity premised on the ability to earn a wage through mining labour depended to a large degree on whether they had grown up with injured or disabled men within the home – or, indeed, with the absence of men who had been killed in the colliery. Similarly, a comparison of South Wales miners' autobiographies with those written by miners from other British coalfields revealed regional variations in boys' understanding of the risks they would be accepting when they began work in the industry.

## Chapter 2

### Mechanisation

At the beginning of the twentieth century, machine mining technology was in its infancy and the overwhelming majority of coal was extracted using traditional hand-got methods. Colliers used hand tools – picks and shovels – and sometimes explosives to bring the coal off the coalface and then loaded it into tubs for transportation to the surface. As mining technology developed, these traditional tools were replaced by machines capable of mechanically performing the roles previously assigned to the mining workforce. The implementation of mechanised mining methods led to fundamental changes in the position of miners in the labour process. This chapter explores how miners' masculinities and working identities were negotiated in response to these changes in the South Wales mining industry.

Scholarly explorations of the changing nature of coal production and mining labour have not featured prominently in the traditional labour histories of the British coalfields, even though this absence was noted in the 1980s. To quote the social historian M. J. Daunton, writing in 1981, 'Unfortunately, the spate of histories of miners' unions has neglected the nature of work and its impact upon the daily experience of the men'.<sup>1</sup> Daunton points out that the index of Hywel Francis and David Smith's seminal work on the South Wales coalfield, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, 'do[es] not even mention one central trend of the period: the impact of mechanization upon the

---

<sup>1</sup> M. J. Daunton, 'Down the Pit: Work in the Great Northern and South Wales Coalfield, 1870-1914', *The Economic History Review*, 34. 4 (1981), pp. 578-597 (p. 596).

system of work relations'.<sup>2</sup> Daunton argues that in areas as heavily reliant upon one form of employment as mining communities were, the social relationships of work played a central role in determining the social relationships of the broader community.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, Daunton called for historians of the coalfield to 'take account of work itself'.<sup>4</sup> This is a call that gender historians have, thus far, left unanswered.

Collectively, gendered research of the coal industry has stressed the centrality of mining labour to miners' constructions of masculinity. Mining labour, however, has largely been treated by gender historians as immutable. There is little acknowledgement of the technological developments within the industry, and the effect of these developments on miners' everyday experiences of mining and social relations underground. This is even the case when the research engages directly with miners' experiences of mining labour. Stephanie Ward, for example, has provided a valuable contribution to the gendered history of the South Wales coalfield in her article arguing for the significance of the body to miners' constructions of masculinity.<sup>5</sup> Ward's study begins in the workplace, emphasising that a muscular body shaped by minework was a symbol of manhood. The article, however, does not consider how the relationship between minework and embodied masculinity changed as technological developments changed the nature of mining labour.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Daunton, 'Down the Pit', *The Economic History Review*, p. 596; Francis and Smith, *The Fed*.

<sup>3</sup> Daunton, 'Down the Pit', *The Economic History Review*, p. 579.

<sup>4</sup> Daunton, 'Down the Pit', *The Economic History Review*, p. 597.

<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Ward, 'Miners' Bodies and Masculine Identity in Britain, c. 1900-1950', *Cultural and Social History*, 18: 3 (2021), pp. 443-462.

<sup>6</sup> Ward, 'Miners' Bodies', *Cultural and Social History*, pp. 443-462.

Ward's research, like much of the gendered research of the British coalfield, covers the period from 1900-1950 – a period which saw significant technological developments in the coal industry. Ward acknowledges that some miners thought mining was a more physically demanding job in the earlier part of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Mechanisation is mentioned explicitly only once in Ward's article – an acknowledgement in the conclusion that the physically demanding and dirty nature of minework continued to be emphasised in leaflets about mining conditions even after mechanisation.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in Ben Curtis and Steven Thompson's article considering the ways minework prematurely aged the men working in the industry between 1880 and 1947, the impact of mechanisation is only mentioned in a footnote.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst the gendered history of coal mining is still an emerging field, there have been missed opportunities to consider the significance of the changing nature of mining labour to miners' perceptions of their masculinity. For the most part, historians offering a gendered analysis of the British coalfields have been content to discuss the nature of mining labour in the broadest possible terms. Indeed, there is a tendency to highlight aspects of mining labour that remain, if not always unchanged, then at least consistently present despite technological developments in the industry. Curtis and Thompson, for example, describe how miners 'work[ed] shifts of ten to twelve hours in the nineteenth century or eight to nine hours by the twentieth century, underground, in cramped conditions, in a

---

<sup>7</sup> Ward, 'Miners' Bodies', *Cultural and Social History*, p. 448.

<sup>8</sup> Ward, 'Miners' Bodies', *Cultural and Social History*, p. 457.

<sup>9</sup> Curtis and Thompson, "This is the Country of Premature Old Men", *Cultural and Social History*, p. 603.

deleterious environment, and with hard physical labour to be done...'.<sup>10</sup> Whilst the shortening of the workday is noted (a consequence of legislation implemented in 1910), it is otherwise the consistent components of minework – the subterranean environment, the danger, and the physical demands of the job – that are remarked upon. Ward similarly notes the 'peculiar environment of working underground', the 'danger of the mine', and 'the physical trauma of labouring' in her study of miners' embodied masculinity.<sup>11</sup>

The one exception is Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston's *Miners' Lung: A History of Dust Disease in British Coal Mining*.<sup>12</sup> Their research highlights the causal relationship between mechanised mining methods and the increased prevalence of dust disease amongst miners.<sup>13</sup> McIvor and Johnston devote only eleven pages of their book to providing a gendered analysis of miners' reactions to increased dust levels.<sup>14</sup> However, in doing so, they demonstrate the value of historicising scholarly understandings of the relationship between the nature of mining labour, miners' masculinities, and working identities. By placing the mechanisation of coal production within its economic context – the contraction of the industry and the requirement for greater efficiency – the authors stress that some miners tolerated dust-related risk as a compromise between their long-term health and maintaining their status as breadwinner: 'Compromises had to be made to protect jobs and keep the pit going, and if that meant swallowing the dust,

---

<sup>10</sup> Curtis and Thompson, 'This is the Country', *Cultural and Social History*, p. 591.

<sup>11</sup> Ward, 'Miners' Bodies', *Cultural and Social History*, pp. 448-449.

<sup>12</sup> McIvor and Johnston, *Miners' Lung*.

<sup>13</sup> McIvor and Johnston, *Miners' Lung*, p. 150

<sup>14</sup> McIvor and Johnston, *Miners' Lung*, pp. 259-269.

so be it'.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, McIvor and Johnston also note that the impact of mechanisation on miners' masculinities varied across mining generations. Though the acceptance of high levels of risk contributed to the 'hardman' culture of the pit, younger miners, the authors suggest, were less tolerant of dusty conditions because their vocational training had emphasised the associated dangers.<sup>16</sup> As discussed, however, the significance of mechanisation's impact on the nature of mining labour has not been discussed by other gender historians, and consequently, there have been no further attempts to explore the implications for miners' masculinities.

Studies of other industries have shown that changes in the labour process impact the formulation of gender identities and gender relations.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, studies of other male-dominated industries have demonstrated that when the nature of labour is changed as a result of technological developments, masculinities and working identities have to be renegotiated. This point is made by Cynthia Cockburn in relation to the British print industry in the late-1970s and early 1980s, for example. Cockburn characterised her sociological study of the computerisation of the print industry as 'a study in the making and remaking of men'.<sup>18</sup> The implementation and impact of technological developments in the coal industry has received considerable attention from scholars in other fields and disciplines. The regional and chronological pattern of the implementation of machine-mining

---

<sup>15</sup> McIvor and Johnston, *Miners' Lung*, p. 268.

<sup>16</sup> McIvor and Johnston, *Miners' Lung*, p. 266.

<sup>17</sup> See for example: Sonya O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London: Pluto Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Cockburn, *Brothers*, p. 3.

methods has, for example, been explored in various economic histories of the coalfields.<sup>19</sup> Of most significance for this study, however, is the range of literature – including social histories and sociological studies – exploring the impact of mechanisation on the social organisation of mining labour and the everyday lives of miners.<sup>20</sup> Within this literature there is a consensus that the implementation of machine mining methods led to fundamental changes in the position of miners in the labour process and the pattern of social relations underground. There is therefore an opportunity to build on this scholarship to provide an account of the relationship between mining labour and miners' masculinities that considers the impact of technological developments within the industry.

This chapter argues for the importance of the nature of work to studies of working-class masculinities. These relationships need to be explored in the context of technological developments in the workplace so as to reveal developments in workers' perceptions of their gendered identities. Whilst this thesis focuses predominantly on the South Wales coalfield in the post-nationalisation (1947) era, the current absence of any gendered analysis on

---

<sup>19</sup> See for example: N. K. Buxton, *The Economic Development of the British Coal Industry from Industrial Revolution to the Present Day* (London: Batsford Academic, 1978), pp. 108-115; Mitchell, *Economic Development*, pp. 70-98; David Greasley, 'The Diffusion of Machine Cutting in the British Coal Industry, 1902-1938', *Explorations in Economic History*, 19 (1982), pp. 246-268; Trevor Boyns, 'Jigging and Shaking: Technical Choice in the South Wales Coal Industry Between the Wars', *Welsh History Review*, 17. 2 (1994), pp. 230-251; Alan Burns, Martin Newby and Jonathan Winterton, 'The Restructuring of the British Coal Industry', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 9 (1985), pp. 93-110.

<sup>20</sup> See for example: Daunton, 'Down the Pit', *The Economic History Review*, pp. 578-597; Trevor Boyns, 'Of Machines and Men in the 1920s', *Llafur*, 5. 2 (1989), pp. 30-39; John H. Goldthorpe, 'Technical Organization as a Factor in Supervisor-Worker Conflict', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 10. 3 (1959), pp. 213-230; E. L. Trist and K. W. Bamforth, 'Some Social and Psychological Consequences of the Longwall Method of Coal-getting', *Human Relations*, 4. 1 (1951), pp. 3-38; Jonathan Winterton, 'Social and Technological Characteristics of Coal-face Work: A Temporal and Spatial Analysis', *Human Relations*, 47. 1 (1994), pp. 89-118; Roger Penn and Rob Simpson, 'The Development of Skilled Work in the British Coal Mining Industry, 1870-1985', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 17. 4 (1986), pp. 339-349.

technological developments and the changing nature of mining labour compels us to start our exploration earlier. This chapter focuses on two waves of mechanisation that shaped the coal industry in the twentieth century. The first saw the introduction of coal conveyors and coal-cutting machines in the period after the First World War. The second wave began in the 1950s with the introduction of power-loading machinery.<sup>21</sup> In order to effectively understand the impact of technological developments in the post war era, it is essential to consider the initial move away from hand-got mining methods in the interwar period. The South Wales coalfield is also an excellent case study for an exploration of the significance of region. As a result of the lack of alternative employment opportunities and the relative isolation of many of the South Wales mining villages, mining labour was of enormous economic, cultural, and social importance for those living in the region. The nature of mining labour and the pattern of mechanisation was shaped by the particularly challenging geology of the coalfield.<sup>22</sup> Focusing on South Wales therefore allows us to consider the geography of miners' masculinities in relation to coalfield-wide and colliery-specific patterns of mechanisation.

The reflective nature of autobiographies and oral testimonies means that they are most frequently produced by older members of the mining community.

The personal testimonies of miners can therefore reveal much about their

---

<sup>21</sup> A third wave of mechanisation involving the automation of coal production was hampered by technological and geological difficulties. Its development and implementation in Britain was cut short by the decline of the industry. Some commentary on the intended process can be found in: Penn and Simpson: 'The Development of Skilled Work', *Industrial Relations Journal*, pp. 347-348; Winterton, 'Social and Technological Characteristics', *Human Relations*, pp. 89-118.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the role geology played in shaping the pattern of mechanisation see: Greasley, 'The Diffusion of Machine Cutting', *Explorations in Economic History*, pp. 246-254.

experiences of the changing nature of mining labour and its impact on their perceptions of miners' masculinities. The way in which miners framed discussions of mining labour, however, differs between the autobiographies and the oral testimonies. The published autobiographies of miners were frequently written with the intention of revealing to an unknowing audience the realities of work in the subterranean world of the mine.<sup>23</sup> W. S. Howard's study of miners' autobiographies found that the authors subverted the expected characteristics of the genre by 'writing a plural autobiographical account – a history of selves rather than self'.<sup>24</sup> One of the consequences of this 'history of selves' was the emergence of distinct patterns in the events chosen to narrate the experience of miners: the first day underground, the initial reaction to the underground environment, and the horror of pit accidents. By contrast, the moments at which the nature of mining labour is discussed in miners' oral testimonies is more varied. There is also less emphasis on the first day underground and the process of acclimatising to pit work. This difference can be accounted for by the format of the testimonies. Unlike the autobiographies, the interviews were not meant to be life histories; they were recorded at a time when pit closure programmes threatened the future existence of the mining communities in South Wales and were designed to capture aspects of life in the coalfield across the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> The direction of the interview was shaped by this purpose and through interaction with the interviewer. Despite these differences in form and content, the autobiographies and oral testimonies both emphasise the significance of mining labour to miners' perceptions of

---

<sup>23</sup> Howard, 'Miners' Autobiography', *Labour History Review*, p.90.

<sup>24</sup> Howard, 'Miners' Autobiography', *Labour History Review*, p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> South Wales Coalfield Collection, <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/swcc/> [accessed 26/07/2022].

masculinity. Both sources provide an opportunity to consider how miners reflected on the nature of mining labour and the changes they experienced over the course of their working lives.

This chapter explores the relationship between mining labour, masculinities and working identities during two waves of mechanisation in the twentieth century. Before turning to these waves, I will first explore the significance of mining labour to miners' constructions of masculinity in the era before machine mining methods were introduced. Then, this chapter turns to the first of two significant moments of change in the coal production process – the introduction of coal cutters and coal conveyors after the First World War. I consider the extent to which the initial move from hand-got to machine-mining production disrupted the foundations on which miners' masculinities were constructed, how the effects of this mechanisation process were felt by miners across the lifecycle, and the ways in which miners renegotiated their masculinities and working identities in light of their changed working environment. Last, this chapter explores miners' reactions to the second wave of mechanisation – the introduction of power-loading machines – that took place in the years following nationalisation. I consider how the increased mechanisation of mining labour affected miners' constructions of their masculinities and working identities, and the extent to which miners' responses were shaped by their prior experiences of technological change in the production process.

Prior to the First World War, machine mining technology was in its infancy and the overwhelming majority of coal was produced by hand through manpower

intensive methods. Colliers (known as hewers in some regions outside South Wales) were responsible for bringing the coal off the coalface. This sometimes involved undercutting the seam near the floor using a mandril – a miners' pick. This process allowed the coal over the undercut to be brought down more easily in a process known as ripping. Geological conditions in South Wales usually meant that ripping was a manual process, although, if the coal was particularly hard, explosives were used to bring the coal down (known as shot-firing). Once the ripping process was complete, the colliers used shovels and curling boxes – a sheet of metal with the edges curled-up on three sides – to fill the coal into trams which were then taken away from the face by hauliers. Where roof height allowed, horses were used to pull the trams. Otherwise, the movement of coal to the pit bottom ready for transportation to the surface was achieved through manpower.

The relationship between the physically demanding nature of minework and masculinity is well-established in the historiography. As seen, in her study of embodied masculinity amongst South Wales coal miners, Stephanie Ward found that it was not just the performance of manual labour, but the way in which the body was shaped through exertion that was an important marker of manliness.<sup>26</sup> Yet, the development of physical strength was not the only requirement for the successful performance of mining labour. Miners' descriptions of mining labour attest to the skills and strength required by the men working in the industry during the era of hand-got coal production. In *My Lamp Still Burns*, Robert Morgan, who was born in 1921, recalled how the roles fulfilled by both colliers and hauliers required a

---

<sup>26</sup> Ward, 'Miners' Bodies', *Cultural and Social History*, p. 447.

combination of 'strength and knack'.<sup>27</sup> Bert Coombes, a miner-turned-writer born in 1893 who spent much of his life working in the mines of South Wales, described how his first shift underground involved working with an experienced miner to undercut the coal:

My mate lay on his side and cut the coal. It took me weeks to learn the way of swinging elbows and twisting wrists without moving my shoulders ... We – or rather my mate – had to chip the solid coal away fraction by fraction until we had a groove under it of an inch, then six inches, then a foot.<sup>28</sup>

Coombes joined the industry aged eighteen having previously worked on his family's small farm in Herefordshire.<sup>29</sup> This prior experience of manual labour was of little help; Coombes soon found that 'a different kind of strength was needed' than the one he had developed through farm work.<sup>30</sup> As elucidated by the weeks Coombes took to learn the technique for undercutting, the work was also highly skilled and initially beyond his ability: 'I tried very hard to be useful that night, but was not successful, nor do I believe that any beginner ever has been'.<sup>31</sup> Even filling – often the first task assigned to trainee colliers – required a combination of both strength and skill. Berwyn Howells, who first started work at Garw Ocean Colliery as a fourteen-year-old, recalled that the more experienced miners taught him which tools were best for the job and helped him lift the box when he wasn't strong enough: 'They tell you not to use the shovel but to use the curling box ... But I weren't big enough to get over the top of the tram, so I had to have help to lift the

---

<sup>27</sup> Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, p. 75 and p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> For Coombes' childhood in Herefordshire, see: Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, pp. 7-17.

<sup>30</sup> Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, p. 34.

curling box up. I learnt eventually of course to, not to fill it too full and er then I was able to lift it up myself'.<sup>32</sup>

The requirements of strength and skill, however, were not evenly distributed between colliers and hauliers. Miners' roles did not provide equal opportunity for miners to develop or demonstrate key markers of masculinity. A system of gender relations existed in South Wales collieries that can be understood using Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally dominant form of masculinity present within a society at any given time.<sup>33</sup> It may be constructed in such a way as to make full achievement of the hegemonic pattern unlikely for many men. As such, Connell posits a form of complicit masculinity which accounts for those men who benefit from their association with hegemonic masculinity whilst only embodying some of its characteristics.<sup>34</sup> The division of labour between colliers and hauliers reveals a hierarchy of masculinities in the collieries of South Wales.

Miners' personal testimonies reveal that they perceived haulage work to be less skilled than facework. Will 'Box' Thomas', a miner from Maerdy, described how complex haulage problems required the expertise of an experienced haulier. If a tram full of coal came off the rails 'a raw hand you know, he wouldn't have a clue' how to fix the problem. Thomas, however, also recalled that the role could be performed by other miners when necessary. On occasions where hauliers were absent from work, colliers could step into the role:

---

<sup>32</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells, interviewed by Kim Howells, 3 March 1980.

<sup>33</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>34</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 79

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

perhaps you'd never driven a horse in your life as far as that goes, well, that's all the qualification you've got is that you just say to the horse, "Come on, let's go" and you'd drive the horse to wherever you were sent to with your empty trams, you unhitch him and push the tram to one side so that you can go up and pull the full tram of coal out and that's your job.<sup>35</sup>

The same was not true of facework. As mentioned earlier, on his first shift as a trainee collier Coombes found that the highly skilled nature of facework meant that untrained miners could be of little help.<sup>36</sup>

The uneven division of skilled labour was further exacerbated in South Wales by the geological conditions of the coalfield. The most significant geological phenomenon in the South Wales coalfield was the high level of susceptibility to 'squeeze' – the pressure exerted across the mine after the extraction of coal which led to the partial or complete closing up of the roads driven into the mine. Coombes described the impact of this phenomenon on the main roadways underground:

When the shift begins there may be room for a horse to travel along the roadway and some inches of height clear above his head. Sudden "squeezes" occur, during which the upper roof moves and the weight comes down so heavily on the roadway that the sides cave in, the bottom is forced up, and the roof is pressed down. After one of these squeezes the total space left may be some inches less than the height of the horse.<sup>37</sup>

The 'squeeze' affected the final stage of the coal production process that was carried out after colliers had finished ripping and filling. This final stage involved making the workplace ready for ripping to begin again: stone and other rubbish

---

<sup>35</sup> SWML, AUD/196, William 'Box' Thomas, interviewed by Hywel Francis and David Smith, 30 May 1973.

<sup>36</sup> Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, p. 57.

brought down in the ripping process had to be cleared, timber supports set, and tramlines to the face extended. The importance of this maintenance work is difficult to overstate. Not only was this work essential for the efficient running of the colliery, but it was also a matter of life and death. As Davies, a theologian and priest who was born in 1889 and whose working life began in the South Wales coal mines, recalled, 'Skill meant a great deal, involving one's own life as well as the lives of others. A badly timbered roof for instance, might mean a fall of rock, bringing death'.<sup>38</sup> In other regions, this work was performed by 'special workmen' working on a separate shift, but geological conditions in South Wales dictated that this maintenance work had to be carried out promptly and could not necessarily wait for the next shift.<sup>39</sup> As such, this stage of the production process was often carried out by the colliers.<sup>40</sup> This meant that there was a greater centralisation of skilled work within the remit of the colliers in South Wales than was evident in other mining regions.<sup>41</sup> Miners' testimonies, in recognition of the level of skill required by colliers, assign to them the status of 'craftsman'.<sup>42</sup>

The wages earned through mining labour also varied depending on the role performed. Hauliers earned less than colliers.<sup>43</sup> The Sankey Commission's Report (1919) on the mining industry – which considered the nationalisation of the mines as well as issues related to wages and working conditions – found that in 1914 haulage

---

<sup>38</sup> Davies, *In Search of Myself*, p. 36.

<sup>39</sup> H. Stanley Jevons, *The British Coal Trade* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1915), p. 611.

<sup>40</sup> Daunton, 'Down the Pit', *The Economic History Review*, p. 584.

<sup>41</sup> Daunton, 'Down the Pit', *The Economic History Review*.

<sup>42</sup> See for example: SWML, AUD/390, John Evans; Davies, *In Search of Myself*, p. 36.

<sup>43</sup> SWML, AUD/76, Hywel Jeffreys (alias Jeff Camnant), interviewed by Tim Exton, 15 November 1982; SWML, AUD/196, William 'Box' Thomas.

workers in South Wales earned on average per shift 71 per cent of that earned by colliers.<sup>44</sup> Hauliers in South Wales were typically paid on a daily rate basis, whilst colliers were piece-rate workers.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, colliers could increase the physical intensity of their work to improve – or maintain when challenged – their income. In his autobiography, Morgan recalled a collier nicknamed ‘Tommy Artful’ who had a reputation for having a ‘tenacious workrate’. Nicknames could act like a shorthand for a miner’s reputation and status amongst his colleagues. Tommy’s nickname, Morgan believed, was ‘connected with his skilful speed of workmanship’ which he maintained in order to support his large family.<sup>46</sup> The collier’s ability to control his pace of work should not, however, be overstated. Coombes used his autobiography to defend miners against the suggestion from some members of the public that miners were ‘work-dodging’. Piece-rates, he argued, prevented this, as did pressure from other miners: ‘Men who do not do their share are treated with contempt and are given nicknames, such as “Shonny one tram”, by their fellow-workmen, who are usually too ready to pour out their sweat and their blood’.<sup>47</sup> During the era of hand-got coal production, the culturally dominant form of masculinity in the collieries of South Wales was derived from the role of the physically strong and highly skilled collier. The hierarchy of masculinity that existed in the pit did not articulate a distinction between roles that required strength and skill and those that did not. Instead, it articulated a distinction between the skilled and physically

---

<sup>44</sup> Coal Industry Commission, Vol. 3 Appendices, Charts and Indexes, (1919), Appendix 49, as quoted in: Mitchell, *Economic Development*, p. 206.

<sup>45</sup> Daunton, ‘Down the Pit’, *The Economic History Review*, p. 591.

<sup>46</sup> Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, pp. 85-87.

<sup>47</sup> Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, p. 44.

demanding role of the haulier, and the even more highly skilled and physically demanding role of the collier.

In South Wales, a boy's future position within the mining workforce depended to a large degree on his training route. Boys typically entered the industry as either trainee hauliers or trainee colliers. Trainee colliers developed their ability to perform facework through an informal apprenticeship based on observation, practice, and the gradual development of experience.<sup>48</sup> Colliers did not work in isolation, but in small teams of two or three dotted at regular intervals along the coalface. The team usually consisted of a collier and boy. It was in this small group working environment that trainee colliers completed their informal apprenticeship. For colliers, perhaps more so than for miners in any other role, the completion of the apprenticeship period was marked by a definitive achievement – moving out from under the tutelage of an experienced miner to manage a section of the coalface themselves. It was common parlance for colliers to refer to this achievement as having a 'place of their own' on the coalface – a turn of phrase that emphasises the pride associated with this achievement.<sup>49</sup> Once a collier managed their own section of the coalface, they were assigned a number which they chalked onto the trams they filled – a process that enabled wages to be calculated based on the amount of coal mined by each collier. Having a place of their own and a collier's number signified the completion of the transition from boyhood to manhood. George Evans, a miner who first worked underground as a boy in an unmechanised pit in the early 1940s, recalled the

---

<sup>48</sup> Penn and Simpson, 'The Development of Skilled Work', *Industrial Relations Journal*, p. 342.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example: SWML, AUD/233, Mr and Mrs Ivan Rosser & M. M. Morgan; SWML, AUD/76, Hywel Jeffreys.

'change in status' associated with the achievement, 'Until a boy had a collier's number you know, then he'd be a man then'.<sup>50</sup> Within the hierarchy of labour underground there was also, then, a generational divide. More experienced miners passed on the skills and expertise required of the job to a new generation of miners who would, over time, earn their position as fully-trained members of the workforce.

This pattern of small group working emerged partially as a result of the method of coal production. By the early-nineteenth century, a method of coal production known as bord and pillar (also called the room and pillar, or pillar and stall method) was in common use across the British coalfields. In bord and pillar mining, pillars of coal were left intact to act as roof supports during the first wave of coal extraction.<sup>51</sup> By leaving these pillars of coal, colliers created rooms or 'stalls' with space for just a couple of men to work on any particular stretch of the coalface. Small group working and the collier and boy training system was a consequence of this method. In South Wales, the susceptibility to 'squeeze' meant that the many roads surrounding the pillars could only be kept open through extensive maintenance and propping. This impractical and expensive method began to fall out of use in the region by the mid-nineteenth century and its unfavorability was later cemented by the introduction of mining machines which were designed for use on a different type of coal face. The move away from bord and pillar mining happened later in most British coalfields and was generally tied to the introduction of machine mining methods.<sup>52</sup> The replacement method, longwall mining, involved the

---

<sup>50</sup> SWML, AUD/392, George Evans, interviewed by George Ewart Evans, c. 1960-1979.

<sup>51</sup> This discussion of pillar and stall and longwall methods of coal production in the South Wales coalfield is informed by: Daunton, 'Down the Pit', *The Economic History Review*, p. 582; Boyns, 'Jigging and Shaking', *Welsh History Review*, pp. 234-235.

<sup>52</sup> Daunton, 'Down the Pit', *The Economic History Review*, p. 582

extraction of coal from one long, continuous face. This method had the advantage of requiring less maintenance as the ceiling behind the workings was allowed to collapse as the face advanced.

Daunton argues that the switch to hand-got longwall mining in South Wales had limited social significance. The pattern of small group working which had existed under the previous method continued after the switch to longwall, and whilst colliers no longer had their own stall, they were still assigned to a particular stretch of the coalface.<sup>53</sup> The shift to longwall mining in South Wales leaves little trace in the autobiographies and interviews of former miners. In a rare discussion of the two methods, Thomas Bowden – a collier who moved from Pengam Colliery where the bord and pillar method was used, to Britannia Colliery which had adopted the longwall method – recalled the main difference he noticed between the two methods: ‘the main difference I had when I went to longwall was you were spread out like sheep along the mountain’.<sup>54</sup> With the social organisation of labour maintained, there is no evidence to suggest that the move to the longwall method of mining posed a challenge to miners’ established perceptions of the hierarchy of mining labour or their masculinities.

This system of training colliers was regionally specific; boys in other regions such as the Northeast would commonly enter the industry as drivers (responsible for taking the horses along the main colliery roadways), before progressing to putting (moving empty and full tubs to and from the coalface), and then hewing by the age of

---

<sup>53</sup> Daunton, ‘Down the Pit’, *The Economic History Review*, pp. 583-584.

<sup>54</sup> SWML, AUD/20, Thomas George Bowden, interviewed by Kim Howells, 5 March 1980.

approximately twenty-one.<sup>55</sup> In South Wales, there was no route of progression from haulage work to face work. Despite the lack of progression on to higher status facework, miners' personal testimonies demonstrate that haulage work was the preferred pathway for some boys. In tacit recognition of the hierarchy of mining labour, interviewers Hywel Francis and David Smith, asked Will 'Box' Thomas, the collier from Maerdy, whether there was 'much of a calling' to become a haulier'.

Thomas responded:

if you're a young man, you don't want to be working on the face, you want to be a haulier, you want to be a big boy, you know, and being a haulier was looked upon as being easier work than being a collier, lighter work you know in that sense.<sup>56</sup>

Thomas presented a contradictory view of haulage work, describing it as 'lighter' and 'easier' work that appealed to those that wanted to be 'big boys', as he attempted to construct a narrative that fit with both his own impression of the work – shaped by his years of experience as a collier – and his understanding of why others might have found haulage work appealing. When asked to explain how hauliers could be considered 'big boys', Thomas drew comparisons with trainee colliers who were required to be supervised for a number of years before they were deemed capable of working independently on the coalface:

...if he's working on the coal, well he's working under the supervision of a collier isn't he, of a man. But if you're old enough to go out driving, well then of course he's his own boss in that sense, he's in charge of a horse you see. It was a form of bravado, years ago...<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Daunton, 'Down the Pit', *The Economic History Review*, p. 589.

<sup>56</sup> SWML, AUD/196, William 'Box' Thomas.

<sup>57</sup> SWML, AUD/196, William 'Box' Thomas.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

For some boys who were keen to make the transition from boyhood to manhood, haulage work was appealing because it offered a quicker route to a man's job. Once entrusted in this role, they perceived their newly found independence and responsibility as a marker of status amongst other miners of a similar age. The hierarchy of mining labour was less significant to those boys who focused on their immediate status rather than their long-term performance of manliness over the course of their working lives.

Whether a boy trained as a haulage worker or faceworker was often influenced by their relatives who also worked in the industry. Miners' personal testimonies frequently include the recollection that it was their father who secured them a job in the pit.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, it was not uncommon for boys to be trained by their fathers or other older relatives.<sup>59</sup> Hywel Jeffreys, known locally by the alias Jeff Camnant, recalled that his father insisted he train as a collier rather than undertake haulage work:

I was fond of horses, and I could have had more money driving a horse than going down with my father. But, although the officials were asking for me to go up out and about to drive my father wouldn't let me. "After you've worked a place on coal yourself when you come twenty-one, you can do as you like, but I can show you now", he said, "that the men, younger men than me and stronger men than me are not earning as much as me because they've started driving those horses and they don't think they can do anything else".<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> See for example SWML, AUD/288, John Williams; SWML, AUD/159, David Ronald Jones, interviewed by Hywel Francis, 11 July 1980.

<sup>59</sup> See for example: SWML, AUD/233, Mr and Mrs Ivan Rosser & M. M. Morgan; SWML, AUD/288, John Williams; SWML, AUD/390, John Evans.

<sup>60</sup> SWML, AUD/76, Hywel Jeffreys.

A trainee collier's income could be low as a new starter, increasing over time as he became more able, and reaching its highest rate when he no longer required supervision. For Jeffreys, the promise of a higher wage than he could initially earn as a trainee collier coupled with his love for horses made haulage work more appealing. His father, however, was more aware of the longer-term benefits of facework and used his own experience to convince and push his son in that direction. The limited opportunity for movement between haulage work and facework was enforced by social convention more so than formal restriction. Jeffreys' recollections of his father's advice suggest that haulage workers did not progress in their roles because they felt themselves incapable of undertaking other work. Thomas similarly stressed that young men working in haulage demonstrated bravado, '...until you were in it so much that you didn't know any other job but that'.<sup>61</sup> Whilst those boys who chose to become hauliers may have completed the transition from boyhood to manhood in a shorter timeframe, by not undertaking a collier's apprenticeship they were denied the opportunity to access the dominant construction of masculinity in mining communities.

The first wave of mechanisation in the British coal industry (sometimes known as conventional mechanisation), involving the introduction of coal cutters and coal conveyor machines, had been several decades in the making. Though various designs for these machines had been patented in the 1860s, it was not until the early twentieth century that the innovative technologies became commercially viable.<sup>62</sup> Whilst these machines were first introduced to British

---

<sup>61</sup> SWML, AUD/196, William 'Box' Thomas.

<sup>62</sup> Mitchell, *Economic Development*, pp. 81-84.

collieries in the opening years of the century, the widespread adoption of machine mining techniques spread following increased investment after the First World War. The first wave of mechanisation took place over several decades. The piecemeal nature of mechanisation is evident throughout the interviews in the SWCC. Higher-level managers, such as NCB South Wales Area Deputy Director William Cleaver, recalled how the mechanisation process was implemented: 'We had no criterion to go on. You just choose the easiest ones first, the ones with good roofs and good floors and reasonable seams and didn't vary too much from two foot to nine foot every second week'.<sup>63</sup> Geological conditions and economic realities typically dictated whether or not a face was mechanised; even within a given pit it was possible for some faces to be mechanised and others not. Even into the mid-1950s there were a small number of mines – usually those smallest in scale – that still produced coal using traditional hand-got methods.<sup>64</sup> Though part of the same wave of mechanisation, coal-cutters and conveyors fulfilled very different functions. Coal cutters, as the name suggests, superseded the technique of undercutting the coal using hand tools. The machine, suitable for use with the longwall method, was able to undercut a large wedge along the whole length of the face. Meanwhile, coal conveyors mechanised the process of transporting coal away from the face. Both machines performed work previously undertaken by colliers and hauliers.

Geological conditions also affected the type of mechanisation adopted.

Across the majority of the British coalfields coal cutters and conveyors were

---

<sup>63</sup> SWML, AUD/44, William Benjamin Cleaver, interviewed by Kim Howells, 6 May 1980.

<sup>64</sup> Goldthorpe, 'Technical Organization', *The British Journal of Sociology*, p. 213.

introduced simultaneously, resulting in a tendency to think of these machines as a single technology.<sup>65</sup> In the South Wales coalfield, the pattern of mechanisation was markedly different than elsewhere in Britain.<sup>66</sup> This was largely a result of the geology of the coalfield which frequently made it uneconomical and impractical to adopt coal cutting machines.<sup>67</sup> Coal conveyors, therefore, were frequently introduced in isolation and used alongside traditional hand-got coal cutting techniques. That is not to say that there was a complete absence of cutting machines in the region. The regional pattern of mechanisation has led to the perception that the South Wales coalfield was slow to mechanise.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the interviewer of John Evans appeared to think this was the case as he expressed surprise that Evans began working with coal cutting machines in 1918: 'As early as that, coal cutting machines?'<sup>69</sup> This perception was eventually dispelled by Trevor Boyns who noted that the level of mechanisation in the British coalfields was being judged only by the percentage of coal mechanically cut.<sup>70</sup> Far from being slow to mechanise, South Wales was an early adopter of coal conveyor machines: in 1913 the South Wales coalfield had 17.2 per cent of the total proportion of coal conveyors in use across the British coalfields. By comparison, in the same year South Wales had 4 per cent of the total number of coal cutters in use.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Boyns, 'Jigging and Shaking', *Welsh History Review*, p. 231.

<sup>66</sup> Boyns, 'Jigging and Shaking', *Welsh History Review*, pp. 230-234.

<sup>67</sup> For an explanation of why coal cutters were uneconomical and impractical in South Wales, see: Greasley, 'The Diffusion of Machine Cutting', *Explorations in Economic History*, p. 253; Boyns, 'Jigging and Shaking', *Welsh History Review*, pp. 240-242.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example Buxton, *Economic Development*, pp. 112-115 and pp. 182-84.

<sup>69</sup> SWML, AUD/390, John Evans.

<sup>70</sup> Boyns, 'Jigging and Shaking', *Welsh History Review*, pp. 230-231.

<sup>71</sup> *Annual Reports of H. M. Chief Inspector of Mines and H. M. Secretary for Mines, 1921-38*, as quoted in Boyns, 'Jigging and Shaking', *Welsh History Review*, p. 232.

The introduction of coal conveyors made the haulier's role largely obsolete.<sup>72</sup> Combined with the fact that hauliers made up a smaller proportion of the workforce than colliers, their obsolescence following the introduction of conveyors provides an explanation for the more limited number of hauliers whose voices appear in the oral testimonies and the published autobiographies. Some men who were hauliers during the era of hand-got production continued working in the industry in other jobs after mechanisation. This was the case for Jeff, an older colleague of collier George Evans with whom he shared a close relationship. George Evans recalled that Jeff, who had worked as a driver (haulage work) for many years, preferred work under the pre-mechanised system. When accounting for Jeff's preference, George Evans recalled:

... it gave men status too see. And it put men, it sort of evened things out see. You had natural leadership emerging which, you know, I mean a fella who wasn't very good at timbering would keep his mouth shut when they were talking about timbering, wouldn't he ... and people like Jeff miss this see. They made a, they went out, they made a name for themselves a reputation for themselves as good timbermen and, and you know by the time they come fifty it makes life quite pleasant for them see.<sup>73</sup>

Evans' recollections emphasise the value that was placed on the gradual development of experience during the era of hand-got coal production. When Jeff had to move to a different colliery where mechanised methods of haulage were employed, 'he broke his heart, you know. Because he'd been driving the main drift ... for years you know. He was a man of, to be accounted with in the Cornish drift, see. But then he was just, you know, just one bloke, one bloke out of many...'<sup>74</sup> For

---

<sup>72</sup> Boyns, 'Jigging and Shaking', *Welsh History Review*, p. 246.

<sup>73</sup> SWML, AUD/392, George Evans.

<sup>74</sup> SWML, AUD/392, George Evans.

older miners such as Jeff, the strenuous nature of mining labour made the work increasingly more difficult to perform as miners got older – an ageing process that was frequently accelerated by the deleterious nature of the work.<sup>75</sup> Skill and reputation were needed as bulwarks against the diminishing ability to meet the physical requirements of the job. Evans recalled Jeff telling him that he had been mistaken in thinking that if he worked ‘very hard with all the rest that he’d be noticed again’. Instead, Jeff found that ‘he hasn’t got the energy to make a reputation again, see. His time is past isn’t it.’<sup>76</sup> Jeff’s advanced position in the lifecycle meant that the ability to distinguish himself through the gradual development of experience was not a possibility for him. When Jeff’s skills and years of mining experience became redundant, the foundations of his working identity and masculinity were removed. Consequently, his experience of mechanisation was one of loss, recalled by Evans as heartbreak.

On faces where mechanisation constituted hand-got coal cutting, ripping, and filling on to conveyors, the collier’s role remained largely unchanged. It was the introduction of coal-cutting machines that changed the nature of the collier’s labour. Bert Coombes, who wrote extensively about his experiences in the collieries of South Wales, noted that some in the industry felt coal-cutters resulted in the de-skilling of colliers: ‘the purists in our job insist that these men are not colliers, as the machine does the actual coal-cutting, and not much skill is required for the work which is left’.<sup>77</sup> This perspective has been mirrored by some

---

<sup>75</sup> For the premature ageing of miners, see: Curtis and Thompson, “This is the Country of Premature Old Men”, *Cultural and Social History*, pp. 587-606.

<sup>76</sup> SWML, AUD/392, George Evans.

<sup>77</sup> Bert Coombes, *A Miners’ Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1945), p. 102.

scholars. Trevor Boyns, in his exploration of the implementation of new working practices in the South Wales coalfield in the 1920s, argued that where coal cutters were introduced, the effect on the role and status of colliers was significant: 'the colliers on machine-cut faces thus become, in essence, labourers who filled the coal into tubs or onto conveyors'.<sup>78</sup> The attitudes that Coombes recalled some miners holding is rarely, however, replicated in the other personal testimonies of miners in South Wales. In the scholarship, Penn and Simpson have offered a defence of the skilled role of the collier after the introduction of coal-cutters. They argue that the idea that the collier's role was de-skilled once they no longer cut the coal by hand does not take account of the skill involved in other aspects of the collier's role.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Coombes himself felt that this was an inaccurate representation of the changed nature of the collier's role. Though coal-cutting had been, he felt, 'the hardest and most skilled work' performed by the collier, the ease with which the ripping and filling process was completed still 'depend[ed] on the skill, sometimes the luck, of the collier'.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, a reduction in the physical labour performed by colliers did not mean their role was no longer physically strenuous. Berwyn Howells, who trained on both hand and machine cut faces as a boy, recalled the strength and skill required by colliers on mechanised faces:

...well, I found that it was physically very, very hard. Although it was all shovel work, you didn't have a pick in your hand all day because of the cutter. I found it very hard ... Although you're quite capable in your mind, and your, you can put the posts up and you can do everything that you're supposed to do to watch your back. It is a bit silly because your body is not quite there then, it's not physically fit enough to do it.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Boyns, 'Of Machines and Men', *Llafur*, p. 34.

<sup>79</sup> Penn and Simpson, 'The Development of Skilled Work', *Industrial Relations Journal*, p. 344.

<sup>80</sup> Coombes, *A Miners' Day*, p. 102.

<sup>81</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

The transition from trainee to adult collier – from boyhood to manhood – after mechanisation still required trainees to develop the necessary skills and strength to perform coalface labour. Coal-cutters did reduce the skill and exertion required by colliers. Their roles, however, were not sufficiently undermined to require colliers to renegotiate their perspective of their own masculinity.

Colliers' perceptions of their masculinity may not have required renegotiation because of their continued ability to earn a wage from physically demanding and skilled mining labour, but their roles no longer afforded them a securely established position at the top of the hierarchy of mining labour and masculinity. This is emphasised repeatedly in miners' laments and expressions of nostalgia for the pre-mechanised system of coal production. John Evans, who surprised his interviewer when he confirmed that he worked with a coal-cutting machine as early as 1918, was trained by his father on a hand-got pillar and stall coalface. Then, at the point of which he would have earned a 'stall of his own', he began work as a collier on a longwall face where coal was cut by machine. Unlike Howells who had trained on a variety of methods, John Evans had been trained specifically for hand-got coal production. His reflections on the old and new method reveal a nostalgia for the craft he had developed during his apprenticeship: '[in] a stall system every man had a pride in his work, didn't he? Today it's cut the coal, chuck to one side, move on.'<sup>82</sup> In comparing the two systems, John Evans' dislike of the increased pace of coal production after mechanisation is also apparent. A collier's ability to decide the pace of his work

---

<sup>82</sup> SWML, AUD/390, John Evans.

had always been limited. There was, however, increased pressure to achieve and maintain high production rates following the introduction of coal-cutting machines. For these machines to be successfully deployed, miners had to keep the longwall face straight, and the pace of advance had to be determined by the requirements of the machine.<sup>83</sup> Others also missed the lack of control colliers were previously able to assert over their work. With reference to deputies who monitored production in the era of hand-got coal mining, George Evans reflected that 'you can tell a man, you can tell him to go to hell or something and you feel a little bit better, like. You can't do anything to a machine can you?'<sup>84</sup> Adult colliers who had trained under the hand-got system lamented the loss of their independence that occurred when mechanised production methods were introduced. Under this new system they were answerable to the machines and the colliery deputies in a way they had not been before.

The stage in a collier's working life at which they first experienced mechanisation appears to be key for understanding whether they felt their status had been, in some way, reduced. As demonstrated above, Jeff struggled to adapt to a new role underground because he was approaching the end of his working life.<sup>85</sup> Both John Evans and George Evans began work on a mechanised face after first completing their informal apprenticeships on faces without coal-cutters. Their testimonies demonstrate them to have been keenly aware of the social advantages and disadvantages of both hand-got and mechanised methods of coal

---

<sup>83</sup> Boyns, 'Of Machines and Men', *Llafur*, p. 34.

<sup>84</sup> SWML, AUD/392, George Evans.

<sup>85</sup> SWML, AUD/392, George Evans.

production.<sup>86</sup> Berwyn Howell, however, who came into the industry whilst the systems were changing and who worked on both hand-got and mechanised faces during his training, appeared much less aware of the shifting social organisation of mining labour.<sup>87</sup> At the point in his working life when Howells first undertook mining labour on a mechanised face, his achievement of the markers of manliness associated with the collier's role were still aspirational. He had not yet achieved the status of collier. This appears to have protected him from any perceived loss of status. A reduction in status, then, was felt most by those adult colliers whose working lives spanned across both eras of coal production.

The social organisation of mining labour also shifted as a result of the new categories of workmen required to operate and maintain the machines. In the initial stages of mechanisation, colliers often switched roles and began operating the coal cutting machines. This was the case for Bert Coombes who worked on one of the first coal cutting machines installed in the South Wales coalfield. He noted, however, that there were still occasions when the coal had to be cut by hand. This created problems as new miners were increasingly only trained on machine-mining and 'the managements cannot find younger men who will do it efficiently'.<sup>88</sup> Coombes lamented that boys do not 'learn much of their craft unless they have training at other mining work than machine mining'.<sup>89</sup> His focus on the experiences no longer commonly held amongst new miners suggests that Coombes felt secure about his altered working identity and sense of masculinity.

---

<sup>86</sup> SWML, AUD/390, John Evans; SWML, AUD/392, George Evans.

<sup>87</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

<sup>88</sup> Coombes, *A Miners' Day*, p. 102.

<sup>89</sup> Coombes, *A Miners' Day*, p. 103.

By swapping the role of collier for machine man he had, over time, gained the ability required to cut coal by either hand-got or mechanised methods. Here we can see that the introduction of machine mining and the resulting changes to the make-up of the workforce lead to further adjustments in the hierarchy of mining labour – the role of collier now jostled for status with that of machine operator.

Mechanisation also brought with it changes in the unit of work. The new work unit consisted of a combination of men involved in the operation of coal-cutters, movement of conveyor belts, ripping and filling of the coal, and maintenance of the roadways. As such, the collier and boy relationship, which had survived the transition from hand-got pillar and stall to hand-got longwall mining, became increasingly unviable as levels of mechanisation increased. The informal apprenticeship was replaced with collective training. As George Evans recalled, ‘under mechanisation the boys are put to work in groups, so the boys themselves sort of create their own little society’.<sup>90</sup> When the collier and boy relationship existed, it functioned as a means of social conditioning. Colliers, Evans recalled, ‘had various ways of putting you in order’, but under the new training system boys ‘became quite cheeky. They can pick on one man and be quite rude with him’.<sup>91</sup> In this way, the traditional generational divide in the hierarchy of mining labour was also broken down as training methods were adjusted to better suit mechanised coal production. This was further exacerbated by the removal of markers of

---

<sup>90</sup> SWML, AUD/392, George Evans.

<sup>91</sup> SWML, AUD/392, George Evans.

transition between boyhood and manhood. Gaining a collier's number and a stall of their own were part of 'the old sort of hierarchy'.<sup>92</sup>

By 1939, the British coal industry was producing coal using a patchwork of traditional hand-got and conventional mechanised methods. Though considerable progress had been made towards modernisation, there were longstanding concerns in government regarding the efficiency of the industry and its ability to meet the needs of the nation. These concerns grew during the Second World War because of a drop in the output of coal and the shortage of manpower within the industry.<sup>93</sup> Towards the end of the War, the government commissioned a report to investigate the condition of the coal industry and provide recommendations for ensuring its technical efficiency. The resulting report (the Reid Report), published in 1945, recognised that the future efficiency of the industry depended on its modernisation and included amongst its recommendations the development of innovative technologies, namely power-loading machines: 'The work which is being done on their application and development must be vigorously pressed forward and coordinated'.<sup>94</sup> The implementation of the second wave of mechanisation was made possible by the nationalisation of the industry in 1947. Nationalisation brought industrial strategy and operations management under the purview of the NCB, enabling, for the first time, a co-ordinated approach to modernisation and development. The roll-out of power-loading machinery began in earnest in the mid-1950s and, once underway, it continued at pace throughout

---

<sup>92</sup> SWML, AUD/392, George Evans.

<sup>93</sup> Tom Hickman, *Called Up, Sent Down: The Bevin Boys' War*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2008), pp. 2-7.

<sup>94</sup> Ministry of Fuel and Power, *Coal Mining: Report of the Technical Advisory Committee*, Cmd. 6610 (London: HMSO, 1945), p. 55.

the 1960s. Ninety-nine power-loading machines were in operation in the South Wales coalfield by 1960, and power loading was responsible for half of the coalfield's output by 1964 with further increases by the end of the decade.<sup>95</sup>

Power-loading machines should not be characterised simply as more technologically advanced replacements for the coal cutters and coal conveyors introduced in the opening decades of the century. Rather, power loading represented another significant development in the coal production process. The technical advisory committee responsible for the Reid Report felt that the development of these machines would be nothing short of 'revolutionary' for the coal industry.<sup>96</sup> Power-loading machines removed the need for the separate actions of undercutting the coal seam, bringing the coal off the face (either manually or using explosives), and manually shovelling the coal onto conveyors. Instead, these machines moved continuously along the coal face, shearing the coal and moving it down on to a conveyor which followed behind. Once the machine reached the end of the face it was reversed, and the process was repeated.<sup>97</sup> Many of the traditional responsibilities of the collier in the South Wales coalfield – those associated with the ripping and filling of the coal – which had remained largely unchanged following the first wave of mechanisation in the coalfield, were superseded by this new technology. Miners had to be retrained in

---

<sup>95</sup> 'Future of Coal is Bright: Facts and Figures Justify Confidence', *Pontypridd Observer*, 23 January 1960, p. 7; Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 67.

<sup>96</sup> Ministry of Fuel and Power, *Coal Mining*, Cmd. 6610, p. 51. An overview of the various machines under development at the time of the report can be found on pp. 52-53.

<sup>97</sup> Ministry of Fuel and Power, *The Future of the Coal Miner; How Coming Changes Mean a New Deal and New Opportunities for All Who Work in the Coal Industry: A Brief Explanation Based on the Reid Report* (London: HMSO, 1946), pp. 25-29. For further overviews of power-loading techniques see: Penn and Simpson, 'The Development of Skilled Work', *Industrial Relations Journal*, p. 345; Winterton, 'Social and Technological Characteristics', *Human Relations*, pp. 89-118.

the use of this new machinery. The old divisions of labour had no place on a power-loading coalface. Instead, miners were required to work as interdependent members of a small team who were collectively responsible for coal output. Whilst individual miners still developed specialisms in tasks such as machine driving, all members of the team were trained to carry out any of the tasks required in the production process.<sup>98</sup>

The scale of change that would accompany the implementation of power loading was quickly recognised by the government and miners' leaders alike. In the year following the release of the Reid Report, the government published a booklet with the stated aim of providing those who worked in the industry and potential future recruits with 'some idea of what mining will be like' once the recommendations of the report were implemented.<sup>99</sup> The implicit goals were to foster goodwill towards the reconstruction efforts and alleviate potential concerns regarding the obsolescence of traditional mining skills and jobs. In a demonstration of the co-operation between industry and union on the issue of reconstruction, Will Lawther, President of the NUM, was quoted on the opening page urging all miners to 'play their full part' in the planned developments.<sup>100</sup> One of the touted benefits of power loading was the possibility of 'making machines do more of the work'.<sup>101</sup> Yet this was not without its potential pitfalls for the mining workforce. Indeed, there were frequent claims within the booklet aimed at reassuring members of the workforce who were trained in hand-got production methods: 'No miner skilled in

---

<sup>98</sup> Penn and Simpson, 'The Development of Skilled Work', *Industrial Relations Journal*, p. 345.

<sup>99</sup> Ministry of Fuel and Power, *The Future of the Coal Miner*, p. 3.

<sup>100</sup> Ministry of Fuel and Power, *The Future of the Coal Miner*, p.2. On the position of the NUM see Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 67.

<sup>101</sup> Ministry of Fuel and Power, *The Future of the Coal Miner*, p. 23.

present methods need fear that his experience will be unwanted for years to come'; '...for a good time to come miners will still need their old strength and skill with the pick'; and '...there is still a place for the hand pick and the skill of the miner who knows how to use it'.<sup>102</sup> Those driving forward the second wave of mechanisation therefore demonstrated an understanding of both the value miners attached to the strength and skill they developed during the course of their working lives, and the threat these miners might consequently perceive power loading to pose to their position within the industry.

Given these significant changes in the nature and division of mining labour, it was initially surprising to discover that miners' experiences of power loading featured in their personal testimonies with less frequency and less expansive coverage than the arrival of coal cutters and conveyors in the first half of the century. There are, however, a number of factors that serve to explain this more limited attention. Most of the miners who published their autobiographical accounts had left the industry in the earlier part of the century and did not witness first-hand the arrival of power-loading machines. Miners' recollections of power-loading appear most frequently in the interviews collected for the Second Coalfield Project (which focused on the industry after 1945). Here, the interests of the interviewers often leaned towards reactions to the National Power Loading Agreement (NPLA) in 1966 – which saw the introduction of a day wage for those working on coal faces where power-loading was in operation – and the effects of

---

<sup>102</sup> Ministry of Fuel and Power, *The Future of the Coal Miner*, pp. 3, 9 and 23.

this agreement on production and labour relations.<sup>103</sup> They were less interested in miners' recollections of the experience of adjusting to the new method of mining, and focused instead on the ramifications of the NPLA for the NUM. The richest accounts of miners' experiences and reactions to power loading belong to miners who had two things in common: they worked in pits which had, until that point, been unmechanised; and they were those who felt some degree of conflict or lingering dissatisfaction over the modernisation of the industry.<sup>104</sup> For these miners, the implementation of power-loading techniques perhaps felt more remarkable, and the changes starker, because the replacement of traditional hand-got methods of mining was not experienced incrementally but all at once. It appears that the interview process provided them with an opportunity reflect on and articulate the complexity of their reaction and how their perspective may have changed over time.

A common theme in these testimonies is the lamentation of the loss of status miners suffered as a consequence of the second wave of mechanisation. The colliery manager at Blaenserchan, Brian Williams, was working at Tower Colliery when it was mechanised in 1955. He had joined the industry as a trainee miner two years prior when Tower was still using hand-got production methods and the pillar and stall system. It was, he recalled, one of the last pits in South Wales to do so. When Williams was asked what the 'work atmosphere' was like at

---

<sup>103</sup> See for example SWML, AUD/128, Llewellyn Morgans with comments from Berwyn Howells, interviewed by Kim Howells, 3 March 1980; SWML, AUD/62, William Thomas Goode, interviewed by Kim Howells, 28 March 1980.

<sup>104</sup> See for example SWML, AUD/110, Brian Williams, interviewed by Kim Howells, 31 January 1980; SWML, AUD/66, Elwyn Gwyn Williams, interviewed by Kim Howells, 6 May 1981.

Tower when he first joined, he reflected on the ‘impressive’ characters that existed at that time:

The hauliers, the colliers, the repairers. First class workmen, high calibre workmen. They produced a class of work that I don't think exists in modern days. There seemed to be so much more pride in work in those days. The reward wasn't all that great because the money wasn't very good, but pride overtook everything, I think in those days. Everybody used to talk about so-and-so the repairer was a first-class repairer, the best repairer in the colliery, and so-and-so was the best collier in the colliery. This sort of thing was very important in people's mind.<sup>105</sup>

Earlier this chapter discussed how the introduction of coal conveyors made the role of haulier obsolete. For hauliers, this could mean that their experience of mechanisation became one of personal loss as the foundation of their working identity and masculinity were removed. Williams' recollections demonstrate that when power loading was introduced to a colliery that had previously remained unmechanised, multiple classes of workmen suffered this fate simultaneously. Men's status as skilled miners – marked not only by their job titles, but by their reputation amongst their colleagues – became redundant. In Williams' reflections, the link between workplace reputation and a miner's personal sense of pride is shown. Under the hand-got system, a miner's reputation might offer a degree of psychological and social protection against the threat posed to their masculine identity by the limited financial reward received for the labour they performed. When this status was lost, so too was the surety miners had in their perceptions of their working identity and masculinity.

---

<sup>105</sup> SWML, AUD/110, Brian Williams.

The way in which Williams spoke about his experience of the introduction of power loading at Tower was contradictory in nature. As shown above, his recollections suggest a degree of nostalgia for the system of social relations that existed under the hand-got system. Yet, on three occasions he referred to himself as ‘fortunate’ to have witnessed the transformation of the industry. The second occurrence is of particular note:

Up until 1955 there hadn’t been one single conveyor in the whole of the colliery. All coal was won by hand filling methods, filled into trams and drawn by horses. I suppose I was fortunate enough to see that part of it *and* the introduction of mechanism [sic] within the industry...<sup>106</sup>

On this occasion, Williams expanded the focus of his recollections: he reflected that he was fortunate not only to have experienced the modernisation of the industry but also the traditional methods of coal production which had preceded power loading. Here, uncertainty crept into his phrasing: ‘...I suppose I was fortunate...’. As such, even whilst Williams was attempting to frame the transformation of the industry in a positive manner, a sense of loss entered the narrative. This is emphasised by Williams’ awareness that Tower was one of the last collieries in the coalfield to produce coal using traditional methods. Equally revealing is the lack of clarification William provided as to why he felt fortunate to have witnessed the transformation of the industry. His silence on this matter stands in contrast to his ability to speak at length about what he felt had been lost from Tower since the introduction of power loading machines. In this light, Williams’ repeated assertions that he was ‘fortunate’ to witness the mechanisation

---

<sup>106</sup> SWML, AUD/110, Brian Williams. Emphasis added by author.

of the industry reads more as an attempt to convince himself of what he thought he *should* feel in these circumstances, as opposed to his authentic response to the loss of the traditional division of labour within the colliery.

It is worth pausing here to reflect on the circumstances that may have led Williams to feel conflicted about his reaction to the changing nature of mining labour. As established above, after the publication of the Reid Report in 1945, the NUM, the government, and later the NCB were in lockstep over the necessity of modernising the industry; the impact of modernisation on the workforce was frequently framed in a positive light, particularly with regards to the reduction in physical effort required in the coal production process. Newspaper articles published in South Wales from the 1950s further proclaimed the benefits of modernisation and its acceptance by the workforce. In October 1956, for example, the *Western Mail* reported on a visit of the Minister of Fuel and Power, Aubrey Jones, to Deep Duffryn Colliery where he viewed the efforts that had been made to modernise the century-old pit accompanied by a delegation of local and regional lodge officials. The article reported that despite initial scepticism from the workforce, the implementation of power loading faces had been a success: ‘...the men at Deep Duffryn, said Mr. Jones, “swear by it”’.<sup>107</sup> Similar enthusiasm was reported in the *Pontypridd Observer* in 1964 regarding the re-development of Cwm Colliery, Beddau. The Lodge chairman, Eddie Thomas, was quoted saying ‘...the sooner power loading is installed the happier we will be. Miners are waiting anxiously for it, for they know machine mining makes coalface work easier’.<sup>108</sup> The

---

<sup>107</sup> ‘Strike Threat to Minister’s Colliery Visit’, *Western Mail*, 26 October 1956, p. 1.

<sup>108</sup> ‘Pit’s Output Should Be Zooming Zone’, *Pontypridd Observer*, 12 September 1964, p. 8.

contradictions within Williams' personal testimony may, therefore, be a consequence of a semi-realised awareness of the discrepancies between his personal response to the mechanisation of Tower Colliery and the prevailing view of power loading as expressed publicly by the NCB which he may have felt a responsibility to adhere to because of his role as a colliery manager.

Whilst Williams remained conflicted about the implementation of power loading and what it meant for miners' experiences of working in the industry, others recalled an extended process of coming to terms with the changes. Elwyn Gwyn Williams<sup>109</sup> worked at Taff Merthyr Colliery, near Trelewis, when power loading was first introduced there in 1958. At the time of his interview, Elwyn felt that power loading was '...the finest thing that ever happened to Taff Merthyr'.<sup>110</sup> This was not, however, a conclusion he arrived at quickly. Before power loading was introduced, miners at Taff Merthyr were winning coal using traditional hand-got mining methods. Under this system, Elwyn was a collier who had progressed to having a place of his own on the coal face and was capable of earning what he considered to be a very good wage on piecework. Taff Merthyr, Elwyn recalled, was 'one of the very best paid pits in South Wales', because of the past successes of the lodge in negotiating favourable piecework rates.<sup>111</sup> He and his colleagues initially resisted the implementation of power loading because it meant accepting a regionally negotiated day wage that was significantly lower than what they were capable of earning from piecework. The reduction in wages, however, was only a small part of

---

<sup>109</sup> Elwyn Williams is referred to by his first name from here on to avoid confusion with Brian Williams.

<sup>110</sup> SWML, AUD/66, Elwyn Gwyn Williams.

<sup>111</sup> SWML, AUD/66, Elwyn Gwyn Williams.

the reason for their reluctance: ‘... it wasn’t the money’, Elwyn recalled, ‘it wasn’t the money so much that it was the transformation of the industry. That we was now, basically you can throw away your mandrill [sic] and shovel’.<sup>112</sup> As such, Elwyn’s recollections reveal what he valued most about his work – not the size of his pay-packet, but rather his position within the mining workforce. His mandril and shovel served to mark his role as a collier and his position at the top of the hierarchy of mining labour; these tools functioned as symbols of his working identity and masculinity. Under these circumstances, accepting the implementation of power-loading techniques would have meant accepting his own obsolescence. In other words, Elwyn feared that an end to traditional hand-got mining methods would strike at the very heart of his sense of self and his relationship with the coal industry.

Over time, the experience of working on a power-loading coal face made Elwyn more aware of the benefits of modern mining methods. He recalled how he begrudgingly began to acknowledge the positive ways in which modernisation had improved his life:

At least you go home from work and start to enjoy your bit of social life outside rather than when you go home it was dinner and straight to bed because of basically killing ourselves to obtain a decent standard of living at that time, or any standard of living. We was guaranteed ... at least that you were immaterial of trying to bust ourselves to achieve anything ... At least that they were guaranteeing us now a wage...<sup>113</sup>

---

<sup>112</sup> SWML, AUD/66, Elwyn Gwyn Williams.

<sup>113</sup> SWML, AUD/66, Elwyn Gwyn Williams.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Most of the miners who reflected on the implementation of power loading recognised that they did not have to work as hard as they once did. William Thomas Goode, for example, reflected on the difference between his experience of minework at Rose Heyworth in the 1960s and 1970s and that of the men who worked in the industry in 1945: 'They was working harder ... it used to be in those days a man would have to work more with a mandril [sic], and shovel, and sledge, and hatchet than what they do today ... because the machinery is actually doing the brunt work you know'.<sup>114</sup> Elwyn's recollections, however, reveal that the benefits miners experienced stemmed not only from the *use* of the machines themselves, but from the overhaul of the wage system that was prompted by the roll-out of power loading technology. A guaranteed day wage provided miners at the coal face with a degree of financial security that had not been possible under a piecework system; there was no longer a need for miners to exhaust themselves at work to ensure that they produced enough coal to financially support themselves and their families. Elwyn's description of how his home and social life changed following the introduction of power loading is particularly striking when considered in relation to miners' childhood recollections of the return of their physically exhausted fathers and other male family members following a shift at the colliery. Despite his initial reluctance to accept power loading on the basis of the day wage system, he was unable to deny the improvement these developments brought to his quality of life. These improvements paved the way for his perceptions of his own masculinity and

---

<sup>114</sup> SWML, AUD/62, William Thomas Goode.

working identity to be renegotiated in such a way that placed less emphasis on physical exertion and bodily performance.

The reform of the wage system in the coal industry occurred because the adoption of power loading meant that coal production was no longer dependent on the efforts of individual colliers, but rather on the ability of a small team to efficiently operate the power-loading machinery. This fundamental change in the method of mining meant that a piecework wage system was no longer fit for purpose.<sup>115</sup> As already mentioned, power-loading day wages were initially negotiated at a district level. This led to a great degree of variation in the pay a miner could expect to receive for work on a power loading shift across the British coalfields. In an attempt to rationalise this system, the NPLA was introduced in 1966.<sup>116</sup> As the name suggests, the NPLA was negotiated nationally and replaced the previous patchwork of regional agreements. For the most part, miners in South Wales stood to gain from the NPLA. With high-paying exceptions like Taff Merthyr aside, the challenging geological conditions of the South Wales coalfield typically meant that miners earned less than their counterparts in other regions. One of the principle aims of the NPLA was to ensure that, over a number of years, parity of pay was achieved across power-loading coal faces in all of the British coalfields. Miners working in coalfields where rates of pay had been historically lower would gradually see their wage packet brought up to the level of coalfields like Nottingham where rates of pay had been consistently higher.<sup>117</sup>

---

<sup>115</sup> National Coal Board and National Union of Mineworkers, *National Power Loading Agreement* (National Coal Board, 1966), p. 14.

<sup>116</sup> *National Power Loading Agreement*, p. 13.

<sup>117</sup> *National Power Loading Agreement*, p. 20.

Though the impetus for the creation of the NPLA had come from the NCB many colliery managers were dubious, or outright critical of its effect on the workforce.<sup>118</sup> Terence Clark, the colliery manager at Ffaldau and Garw colliery (which merged in 1975 during his tenure), reflected in his interview on what he perceived the consequences of the NPLA to be: 'If you've got a good man now, you've got to pay him the same as your worst man. So, all you encourage now is the best man to work at the same pace as the worst and give you the same standard of work'.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, Williams – the miner-turned-colliery manager who experienced the implementation of power loading whilst he still worked underground at Tower – was asked what the NPLA meant for collieries in South Wales. He responded, 'The motivation was taken away ... When the motivation was taken away to earn money, when money is just there for the taking, just to go along to work, I think people would naturally take advantage of that'.<sup>120</sup> It is worth pointing out that the concerns of these colliery managers did not constitute an entirely fair assessment of the workforce as a whole. Some collieries actually experienced an initial increase in output following the introduction of the NPLA – a consequence, Ben Curtis argues, of the 'team conscious' spirit that the NPLA fostered.<sup>121</sup>

Intriguingly, there is nothing within miners' testimonies to suggest that they themselves took issue with the uniform rate of pay. There is no (explicit or implicit) discussion, for example, of day wages undermining the status miners had previously held as high-earning colliers, or of any perceived unfairness of earning

---

<sup>118</sup> On the impetus behind the NPLA see Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics, volume 1*, pp. 232-238.

<sup>119</sup> SWML, AUD/121, Terence Clark, interviewed by Kim Howells, 13 February 1980.

<sup>120</sup> SWML, AUD/110, Brian Williams.

<sup>121</sup> Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 64.

the same wage as some who was thought to have worked less hard. It is likely, of course, that if the interviewers had specifically asked miners how they felt about the uniformity of the day wage, a variety of responses would have emerged. Nevertheless, miners' silence on this issue suggests that it was of minimal significance to their perceptions of their own masculinity and working identity. Instead, most miners' recollections speak to the impact that power loading and a guaranteed day wage had on their ability to fulfil the role of the male breadwinner. As we have already seen, some, like Elwyn, experienced relief when they received a guaranteed wage because it meant they did not have to 'bust [them]selves' in order to earn a sufficient wage.<sup>122</sup> A guaranteed wage brought financial security and meant miners were less vulnerable to fluctuations in coal output, for example, and less likely to work themselves to the point of exhaustion.

Earlier in this chapter we saw that the stage in a collier's working life at which they first experienced conventional mechanisation was key to understanding whether they felt their status within the colliery hierarchy was negatively affected. Adult colliers, whose working lives spanned across both eras of coal production were most likely to perceive their status to have been reduced by conventional mechanisation. A similar pattern is observable in miners' responses to the second wave of mechanisation. As discussed above, Elwyn's initial dissatisfaction with power loading stemmed in part from his loss of the markers of status that he had earned during the course of his working life – the place of his own on the coal face, for example.<sup>123</sup> Thomas George Bowden, the

---

<sup>122</sup> SWML, AUD/66, Elwyn Gwyn Williams.

<sup>123</sup> SWML, AUD/66, Elwyn Gwyn Williams.

lodge secretary at Britannia Colliery, also recalled that a miner's relative experience could affect their attitude towards power loading. When power loading was first introduced at Britannia, 'the older type of men didn't want to know ... "Give it to the youngsters, we're used to this work". But er, the youngsters took to it like ducks to water by and large'.<sup>124</sup> Their dismissal of modern mining methods, and their belief that 'youngsters' would be better suited to work of this nature indicates that their perceptions of their own masculinity and working identity were firmly attached to the old system of work. Miners who had less experience working with older methods of coal production were, perhaps, less susceptible to – and more able to negotiate – the challenges that modernisation could pose to their perceptions of their own masculinity and working identity.

This chapter has explored the intertwinement of the nature of mining labour, masculinity and working identity. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, the culturally dominant form of masculinity that existed in the South Wales mining communities was predicated on the performance of skilled and physically demanding mining labour. By examining the everyday experiences of miners in various roles underground, this chapter has established that there was as stark division of skill and strength required in the various mining roles. This resulted in colliers occupying the position at the top of the hierarchy of mining labour and masculinity in the era of hand-got coal production. This division changed significantly as hand-got methods of coal production were replaced by mechanised mining techniques. Coal conveyors made the role of the haulier

---

<sup>124</sup> SWML, AUD/20, Thomas George Bowden.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

obsolete, whilst coal cutting machines got rid of the requirement for the colliers to perform their most skilled and physically demanding labour. The introduction of a new category of mineworker – machine men – left colliers, once securely placed at the top of the hierarchy of mining labour and masculinity, jostling for position. The second wave of mechanisation saw even more dramatic alterations to the social organisation of labour in the South Wales coalfield. When power loading was introduced to faces that had previously been unmechanised, multiple classes of workmen – including colliers – experienced the obsolescence of their roles simultaneously.

As the nature of mining labour changed, so too did the value miners placed on various aspects of their masculinity and working identity. Strength and skill – which had been foundational to the performance of masculinity in the era of hand-got production – became less important as markers of masculine status and working identity as machine mining increasingly disentangled coal production from the individual efforts of the men. At the same time, the central premise of the construction of miners' masculinities in the twentieth century – namely, the ability to earn a wage through the performance of mining labour – became much easier to achieve. The combination of mechanised mining techniques and the introduction of a guaranteed day wage from 1955 significantly reduced the challenges miners faced in fulfilling the requirements of the breadwinner role.

An exploration of the changing nature of mining labour has also revealed the significance of geology and geography to miners' constructions of their masculinities and working identities – geological conditions shaped the division of

labour and the development of social relations underground. It influenced manager's decisions regarding which seams could be mechanised, and what types of mechanisation could be introduced. In this way, geological conditions contributed to the formulation and reformulation of hierarchies of mining labour and masculinity.

Miners' testimonies also revealed that the social organisation of labour underground was partially divided along the lines of lifecycle stage. The pillar and stall system, present throughout much of the coalfield in the opening decades of the century, prompted the formulation of the collier and boy relationship through which trainee miners developed the markers of masculinity and became fully qualified colliers. The changing nature of mining labour eventually removed responsibility for training new miners from individual, experienced colliers. As a result, there is a less clearly demarcated transition from boyhood to manhood in the era of mechanised mining.

This chapter offers a significant contribution to the gender-based analysis of the South Wales coalfield in the form of the first piece of scholarship to historicise the relationship between minework, masculinity and working identity. The autobiographies and oral testimonies of the South Wales miners provided rich and compelling insight into the changing nature of their relationship with the industry. The findings of this chapter reflect the priorities of the miners and, in the case of the oral testimonies, the original interviewers. As such, this chapter has introduced some topics of discussion which could prove fruitful avenues of future research. In particular, an oral history project which seeks to capture miners' day-

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

to-day experience of power loading (the experience of learning how to use the machinery, the events of a typical power-loading shift, and the nature of relationships between miners in a power-loading team) could shed further light on the changing nature of the relationship between minework and masculinity. Such a project would be a timely addition to the pre-existing testimonies of the South Wales miners.

## Chapter 3

### Nationalisation, Job Insecurity, and the Union's Policy of Inaction

Technological developments that fundamentally altered the nature of mining labour were only the first of several major changes to affect the industry in the twentieth century. The second major change involved the structural reshaping of the industry. In 1947, during the fervour of post-war reconstruction, and following a long campaign by the miners' union, the industry was nationalised. Until this point, Britain's coal mines had been in the hands of a large number of private owners who were widely accepted – by the miners, their leaders, and the political establishment – to be responsible for decades of mismanagement and underinvestment.<sup>1</sup> Following nationalisation, responsibility for the management of the industry became the purview of the newly formed NCB. The industry was reorganised into a collection of Coal Board Divisions which broadly correlated to the geographical boundaries of Britain's coalfields. The collieries of South Wales were managed by the South Western Division of the NCB which, at this time, also included the much smaller Forest of Dean and Somerset coalfields.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Both the Sankey Commission (1919) and the Reid Report (1945) had made the case for nationalisation based on the inability of the private owners to secure the future efficiency of the industry. Coal Industry Commission, *Volume II: Reports and Minutes of Evidence on the Second Stage of the Inquiry*, Cmd. 360 (London: HMSO, 1919), pp. vi-vii; Ministry of Fuel and Power, *Coal Mining*, Cmd. 6610, pp. 137-140.

<sup>2</sup> This situation continued until all of the NCB collieries in the Forest of Dean and Somerset coalfields closed in 1960 and 1973 respectively. SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board Public Relations Department, 'Annual Manpower and Saleable Output of the South Wales Coalfield, 1890-1978', [1979(?)].

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Nationalisation was intended to revitalise the industry after a period of extended decline. The NCB could make decisions about the structure of the industry as a whole – about the closure of old or inefficient collieries and the redevelopment or sinking of new pits – which had previously been impossible because of the conflicting interests of the many private owners. Investment in technology could also be prioritised. Indeed, it was under public ownership that many South Wales miners first experienced working with power loading machinery.<sup>3</sup> Though much progress was made on these fronts, the industry was faced with a conflagration of short and longer-term economic challenges from the 1950s which served to complicate this picture. In 1957, demand for coal dropped drastically as a result of a brief industrial recession.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, longer term trends revealing coal's declining share of the energy market were becoming evident.<sup>5</sup> International markets had been lost to competitors, and the Conservative government refused to place a limit on oil imports citing the importance of maintaining customer choice with regards to fuel consumption. Key industries, such as the railways, were also turning away from coal, and the Clean Air Act (1957) encouraged changes in domestic fuel consumption. With the decrease in demand came a spate of colliery closures with South Wales being amongst the worst affected coalfields. The number of collieries operating in the South Western Division fell by 148 between 1947 and 1969, first as a result of the NCB's

---

<sup>3</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Taylor states that demand for coal fell by 18 million tonnes between 1956 and 1958: Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics: Volume 1*, p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> Discussions of the economic factors affecting the coal industry in this period can be found in: Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics: Volume 1*, pp. 179-180; Buxton, *The Economic Development of the British Coal Industry*, pp. 233-245.

rejuvenation efforts and then as a consequence of economic circumstance.<sup>6</sup> By 1970, the industry was just a fraction of its former size with manpower falling by 70,000 leaving just 38,000 men in the region's mines.<sup>7</sup>

Pit closures in this period were a highly divisive issue and proved to be a severe test of industrial relations between the newly formed NCB and the miners' union which had itself been reformulated from its earlier federalised iteration, the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB), into the unified and centralised NUM in 1945. The question of how the union should respond was a near constant feature of union debates in this period, though union policy was to remain very consistent.<sup>8</sup> The NUM was committed to the principles of public ownership and perceived industrial action to be counterproductive to ensuring the success of the nationalisation project.<sup>9</sup> As such, rather than directly challenging the closures, the NUM chose a policy of quiescence where they accepted the closures and worked with the NCB to limit the impact on the workforce.<sup>10</sup> Discontent with union policy grew over time. In South Wales, the union's lacklustre response prompted the growth of an 'unofficial movement' – a semi-organised group led mostly by local union leaders – who pushed for the NUM to adopt a more militant stance on the issue of pit closures.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Colliery Closures – South Wales, Forest of Dean and Somerset Coalfields, 1947-79', [1979(?)].

<sup>7</sup> SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Annual Manpower'.

<sup>8</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. 442-454.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics: Volume 1*, p. 179.

<sup>10</sup> For discussions of the factors influencing the NUM's policy see: Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics: Volume 1*, pp. 185-190.

<sup>11</sup> Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, pp. 73-77.

This chapter is dedicated to exploring the impact of the union's divisive policy of inaction on miners' perceptions of their masculinity and working identity. With the attention of existing masculinities scholarship focused elsewhere, the historiography of the South Wales coalfield after 1947 is still dominated by literature written in the traditional labour history vein. This scholarship has often bypassed the experiences of individual miners altogether, focusing instead on the relationship between the newly formed NCB and NUM.<sup>12</sup> The historiography of the South Wales coalfield in this period, however, cannot all be characterised in this way. Francis and Smith, for example, were keenly aware of the limitations of a labour history approach that exclusively studied leadership, bureaucracy, or politics. They note that the union in South Wales was 'intimately associated with its society', and that to write a history of one without the other would be to 'divorce Adam from Eve by academic degree'.<sup>13</sup> *The Fed* is therefore a combined work of both social and labour history. Nevertheless, the experiences of individual miners are neglected in favour of focus on groups within the coalfield population – specific mining communities, for example, and the amorphous 'rank-and-file'. This chapter further develops scholarly understandings of the role that miners understood union membership to play in the fulfilment of the requirements of masculinity in South Wales mining communities.

This focus poses a methodological challenge. The union's response to the pit closures announced by the NCB in the 1950s and 1960s is recalled in

---

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics: Volume 1*; Michael Barratt-Brown, 'Coal as a Nationalised Industry', in *Studies in the British Coal Industry*, ed. by D. J. Forsyth and D. M. Kelly (Oxford: T&T Publications), pp. 95-134; Andrew J. Taylor, 'The Miners and Nationalisation, 1931-36', *International Review of Social History*, 28. 2 (1983), pp. 176-199.

<sup>13</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. xv-xvi.

surprisingly few testimonies in the SWCC. The men who did reflect on this issue in their interviews typically had two characteristics in common: they tended to be those who were critical of the NUM's inaction over pit closures, and they tended to be miners who also held formal positions within the NUM. The voices of miners who approved of or, at the very least, accepted the NUM's policy concerning pit closures are conspicuously absent. As such, it is necessary to be alert not just to what is voiced in the testimonies, but to the silences also. Proving the reason for an absence of evidence is always difficult. Nevertheless, the reasons for this gap in the oral testimonies are considered below.

Most of the miners who spoke openly about their aversion to the NUM's inaction were local lodge officials who maintained a position within the colliery workforce alongside their union duties. This combination of responsibilities put them in a unique position to not only experience job insecurity first hand, but to also witness its impact on the men they represented. Their union responsibilities weighed heavily upon them, and their interview provided them with an opportunity to grapple with the interplay of their working identities, commitment to collectivism and their sense of moral responsibility. The literature which explores the earlier decades of South Wales mining history through a gendered lens has tentatively begun to explore the role that collectivism and morality played in the dominant construction of masculinity amongst the miners of the coalfield. Sue Bruley's study of the men and women who lived through the seven-month long lockout that precipitated the General Strike in 1926 establishes that collectivism

had a gendered expression in mining communities.<sup>14</sup> She identifies communal kitchens, which came to characterise collective resistance during the dispute, as spaces in which locked-out miners *and* their wives ‘worked together in public life as never before’.<sup>15</sup> Responsibilities, however, were divided along gendered lines with miners taking responsibility for ‘supplying coal from outcrops, stocking boilers and making sure that the fires were lit for cooking’.<sup>16</sup> The experience of communal eating during the lockout was an almost exclusively (adult) male one. Some canteens provided meals for miners’ children, but miners’ wives were not included. This, Bruley argues, was because providing meals for wives ‘implied a fundamental challenge to the existing sexual division of labour, removing meal preparation almost entirely from the home’.<sup>17</sup>

Bruley also makes some brief observations concerning the morality of the duties miners were expected to carry out for collective good. Sheep rustling and the theft of goods were sometimes expected of the men of the coalfield – the necessity of ensuring the community’s survival enabling such illegal activities to become socially licit.<sup>18</sup> More tentatively, Bruley along with Hywel Francis and David Smith have also reflected on the possibility that communal eating arrangements served to sustain community solidarity.<sup>19</sup> Communal eating provided daily social interactions which may have served to re-enforce local forms of morality and

---

<sup>14</sup> Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926*.

<sup>15</sup> Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926*, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926*, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>18</sup> Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>19</sup> Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926*, pp. 56-57; Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 57.

acceptable standards of behaviour, which in this case meant continued commitment to the miners' cause.<sup>20</sup>

The most significant work exploring the interplay of morality and masculinity in the South Wales coalfield to date has been undertaken by Stephanie Ward. In her study of courtship, marriage and gender in interwar South Wales, Ward has proffered that marriage held an exaggerated significance in the region's mining communities because of low female employment rates.<sup>21</sup> This argument is dependent on a system of gender relations in which women had responsibility for maintaining the home whilst men left the home to engage in waged labour in order to financially support their family. For married miners, as demonstrated by Neil Penlington in his study of masculinity and domesticity in South Wales in the 1930s, unemployment threatened this existing structure of gender relations between husband and wife by removing the economic basis for the division of labour.<sup>22</sup> Ward moves this argument a step further. In a society with such clearly demarcated gender roles, employment – and, therefore, masculinity – had a moral component. Ward argues that young unemployed miners who sought to marry found themselves 'unable to live up to an acceptable definition of manhood' which held male employment to be essential to the moral underpinnings of marriage.<sup>23</sup> Though an exploration of the collective means through which miners sought to defend their access and ability to earn a wage through mining labour was outside the scope of Ward's study, her argument implies that miners had a moral

---

<sup>20</sup> Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926*, p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> Ward, 'Drifting into Manhood and Womanhood', *Welsh History Review*, p. 626.

<sup>22</sup> Penlington, 'Masculinity and Domesticity', *Twentieth Century British History*, p. 294.

<sup>23</sup> Ward, 'Drifting into Manhood and Womanhood', *Welsh History Review*, p. 646.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

responsibility to act in defence of these shared interests. This chapter builds on this existing literature by using the testimonies of miners who reflect on the union's policy of inaction to explore the interplay between collectivism, morality, and masculinity. It demonstrates that for some miners in the 1950s and 1960s, a collective defence of miners' interests was, indeed, perceived as the moral underpinning of acceptable masculinity.

Those familiar with the coal industry in the twentieth century will be aware that pit closures and job insecurity were not phenomena confined to the era of public ownership. Many of the miners working in the industry during this period could directly recall the crisis years of the 1920s and 1930s during which time unemployment and poverty were widespread across the South Wales coalfield. These experiences played a significant role in shaping their responses to pit closure announcements and the NUM's policy of inaction. Consequently, this chapter begins by providing an overview of the economic challenges facing the South Wales coalfield in the interwar years as contextualisation for the later discussion. The chapter then briefly outlines the manpower issues facing the industry during the Second World War before the focus turns to track the campaign for nationalisation and miners' reactions to its achievement in 1947. This section establishes that the significance miners attached to nationalisation was tied to their belief that bringing the industry into public ownership would ensure their future job security. Next, this chapter explores how miners' hopes for nationalisation were dashed by the closures that followed and how the fragility of their status as breadwinners once again became apparent. In the final portion of this chapter miners' reactions to the union's policy of inaction over pit closures are

considered and the interplay between masculinity, collectivism, and morality is explored.

The 1920s and 1930s were crisis years in the South Wales coalfield. Initial hopes for a post-war boom soon proved to be illusionary and mining communities across the coalfield were instead battered by economic forces and industrial disputes. Britain had lost key export markets during the First World War and demand for British coal did not recover. Production nationally fell from 270 million tonnes in 1914 to an interwar low of 210 million tonnes in 1933.<sup>24</sup> There was also significant downward pressure on the price of coal, caused partially by Germany paying its war reparations in kind and thus increasing coal supply within the international market. These issues produced a two-fold threat to miners' livelihoods. The first threat came in the form of the industry's reduced manpower requirements. At its peak in 1920, the South Wales coalfield employed 271,161 men.<sup>25</sup> After this, manpower in the region entered a state of near permanent decline. By 1939, the number of men employed had fallen by fifty-two percent to just 128,774.<sup>26</sup> Only during the Second World War was there a brief reversal in this trend as a result of government initiatives aimed at ensuring manpower remained sufficiently high enough to meet the demands of wartime coal production (explored further below).<sup>27</sup> The consequences of the reduced demand for mining

---

<sup>24</sup> This statement excludes the figures for 1921 and 1926 which were significantly lower as a result of the long-lasting national lockouts which took place during these years. See: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Historical Coal Data*.

<sup>25</sup> This was also the year that employment in the coal industry peaked nationally. Almost 1.2 million men were employed in Britain's mines. For the South Wales statistics see: SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Annual Manpower'. For the British statistics see: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Historical Coal Data*.

<sup>26</sup> SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Annual Manpower'.

<sup>27</sup> Hickman, *Called Up, Sent Down*, pp. 1-7.

labour were severe for mining communities. Unemployment was widespread across the South Wales coalfield. At its worst, forty percent of the working population in Glamorgan were unemployed, though this coalfield wide figure masks significant regional variation.<sup>28</sup> Some communities experienced almost full male unemployment.<sup>29</sup> As Steven Thompson has identified, when miners were able to find work, they were often very precariously employed. Underemployment – where miners were only able to find work for a portion of the week – was commonplace as collieries intermittently cut back on production in response to demand.<sup>30</sup>

The second threat to miners' livelihoods concerned the ability of those in work to maintain their breadwinner status. Several factors negatively affected miners' pay packets in this period. Underemployment, for example, not only prevented many from earning a full wage, it could also disqualify men from claiming relief.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, in South Wales, challenging geological conditions combined with the high proportion of old and overworked collieries also made it difficult for men whose wages were attached to the quantity of coal they produced to earn a sufficient income. The most inflammatory issue, however, was that wages were also linked to the price of coal. The downward pressure created by oversupply in the international market (amongst other things) led the colliery owners to make multiple attempts to reduce miners' wages during this period. This

---

<sup>28</sup> For Glamorgan statistics see: Steven Thompson, *Unemployment, Poverty and Health in Interwar South Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), pp. 14 and 21.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Thompson notes the regional difference in unemployment rates and highlights the case of the Blaina unemployment exchange which recorded an unemployment rate of ninety-three percent in 1932. Thompson, *Unemployment, Poverty and Health*, pp. 22 and 252.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, *Unemployment, Poverty and Health*, pp. 18-20.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, *Unemployment, Poverty and Health*, pp. 19-20.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

issue first came to a head in 1921 when the colliery owners were successful in their attempts to lower wages after an eleven-week lockout resulted in the miners' defeat.

The events of 1921 were, in many ways, a prelude to the General Strike and seven-month long lockout of 1926. Certainly, the causes of the dispute felt like familiar ground. In 1925, the government ordered a return to the gold standard – where currency was attached to the value of gold – and, in doing so, undermined the export market for coal by making the pound too strong against other currencies. In response, the colliery owners posted notices of a pay cut and an increased working day. Whilst an initial dispute was averted by a temporary government subsidy and the announcement of a royal commission to explore the challenges facing the industry, this amounted to little more than kicking the can down the road. In 1926, after the subsidy had run out and the Samuel Commission was found to be largely toothless, the owners once again posted notices of a wage cut and increased hours. Though the miners had fought alone in 1921 after the Triple Alliance of Miners, Railwaymen and Transport Workers failed to materialise, in 1926 the MFGB had the backing of the Trades Union Congress (TUC). After negotiations with the owners failed, a general strike was called beginning on 3 May. The strike, though notable for its sheer scale – some 1.5 million workers took part – was ultimately unsuccessful. The TUC called off the strike after nine days for reasons which included fear of violent conflict between trade unionists and the armed forces, as well as concerns that the strike had the capacity to be viewed as

revolutionary in nature.<sup>32</sup> The locked-out miners would continue the dispute for several more months before their eventual defeat in November.

The consequences of defeat were severe. Geological conditions once again ensured that the situation in South Wales was particularly acute. Arthur Horner, who would later become the President of the SWMF – the district union that was affiliated to the MFGB – in 1936, and the General Secretary of the NUM in 1946, recalled that whilst pressure on miners' wages was applied across the British coalfields, more profitable regions such as Nottingham were able to negotiate better conditions whilst, in South Wales, conditions were 'reduced to starvation level'.<sup>33</sup> Many miners were also to remain unemployed for years to come. Victimisation was rife in the coalfield as colliery owners could refuse work to those workers who had taken part in the strike and instead rehire miners who had previously been unemployed.<sup>34</sup> Many families would carry debts from the strike for years to come.<sup>35</sup>

Whether through unemployment or industrial disputes, the experience of being out of work was almost universal amongst miners who lived in the coalfield during these years. The resultant poverty was experienced by an even greater portion of the coalfield population. Childhood recollections of those who grew up in interwar South Wales are characterised by hardship and deprivation (explored further below). Historians of the South Wales coalfield are in broad agreement that

---

<sup>32</sup> Robert Taylor, *The TUC: From The General Strike to New Unionism*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 34-35.

<sup>33</sup> Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel*, p. 96.

<sup>34</sup> Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel*, p. 95.

<sup>35</sup> Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel*, p. 95; Paynter, *My Generation*, pp. 34-35.

the events of the interwar years, and of 1926 in particular, hold a powerful place in the collective memory of these mining communities.<sup>36</sup> Idris Davies' poem, *Do You Remember 1926?*, is often quoted to illustrate this point, particularly the poem's last line: 'And we shall remember 1926 until our blood is run dry'.<sup>37</sup> The coalfield's collective memory of the interwar years is frequently referenced in relation to later national disputes (1972, 1974 and 1984-5). Francis and Smith, for example, state: 'Certainly in South Wales, the whole atmosphere of 1972 was cloaked as much in retribution for 1926 and all that followed, as with a conviction that there must be a decent future for miners and their families in the British coalfield'.<sup>38</sup> As shall be seen, these experiences were also at the forefront of miners' minds when they considered the prospect of nationalisation and of the pit closures that occurred in the decades that followed.

Whilst the opening decades of the twentieth century gave miners little cause for optimism, the catalyst for change was found in the Second World War. For the second time since the beginning of the century, coal miners were to prove indispensable to the nation in a time of war. Coal was essential to the war effort, and it was vital that Britain's mines and miners were capable of meeting the demands of wartime production. Though initial efforts proved satisfactory, production levels soon began to fall *and* continued to fall for the duration of the war. Nationally, coal production fell by forty-nine million tonnes between 1939 and 1945.<sup>39</sup> Across the South Wales coalfield alone, production fell by nearly fifteen

---

<sup>36</sup> Selway, 'Collective Memory'.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted here from Selway, 'Collective Memory', p. 36. See also, Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 55; Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 477.

<sup>39</sup> Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Historical Coal Data*.

million tonnes between 1939 and 1945.<sup>40</sup> This, at least partially, was a consequence of the decline in the number of men employed in the industry. Regulations surrounding conscription had enabled miners to drift away from the industry; when key export markets were lost in 1940 because of the war, the government raised the age at which miners were reserved from twenty-three (the age which had been set in 1939) to thirty with the aim of enabling unemployed miners to seek work elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> As Tom Hickman has identified, this decision proved to be a mistake, particularly as recruitment to the industry was also not keeping up with natural wastage.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the government would go to significant lengths in their attempts to reverse this decline. Most notable was the introduction of the Bevin Boys scheme in 1943 which saw some 20,000 eighteen-year-olds conscripted, not into the armed forces, but into Britain's mines. In *Called Up, Sent Down*, Tom Hickman explores the war time experiences of the Bevin Boys. Many of the Bevin Boys, he argues, were well-treated and warmly accepted by the pre-existing mining workforce.<sup>43</sup> He draws on the testimony of conscripted miner, Alan Gregory, who reflected on the cause of this goodwill: 'Miners had for generations felt that they were hard done by. The fact that college boys and suchlike had been directed to work underground somehow elevated their status'.<sup>44</sup> The war had done much to elevate the public perception of Britain's coal miners. Horner, who was President of the SWMF during the war, recalled that: 'It was clear to us who had our

---

<sup>40</sup> SWML, National Coal Board, 'Annual Manpower', HD 9551.5 GRE.

<sup>41</sup> *Schedule of Reserved Occupations (Provisional)*, Cmd. 5926 (London: HMSO, 1939), pp. 22-23. See also, Hickman, *Called Up, Sent Down*, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Hickman, *Called Up, Sent Down*, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Hickman, *Called Up, Sent Down*, pp. 121-123.

<sup>44</sup> Hickman, *Called Up, Sent Down*, p. 121.

ear to the ground, both among the men and women in industry and in the forces, that there was a tremendous upsurge of feeling taking place ... The skill of the miners, which had been wasted in the years of peace, was now revealed to the whole nation as one of our most valuable assets'.<sup>45</sup> The war had reminded the nation that miners mattered. The proof of this understanding was to be demonstrated through the implementation of the nationalisation programme in 1947.

The debate concerning the ownership and organisation of the industry was a longstanding one. Miners and their union had long been convinced that the future prosperity of both the workforce and the industry could only be ensured through nationalisation. The achievement of this goal had appeared likely before. During the First World War, the necessity of ensuring stable coal production had resulted in the industry being brought under government control. When the time came to consider the return of control to the industry's private owners, the MFGB called for nationalisation to feature as part of a package of post-war reforms. In response, the government commissioned a report on the prevailing conditions within the British coal industry. For a brief moment, it appeared that the government was willing to consider the possibility of bringing the coal industry into public ownership. The Sankey Commission (1919) recommended 'that the principle of State ownership of the coal mines be accepted'.<sup>46</sup> Lloyd George's government, however, refused to implement the report's recommendations. It was to be another government report – the Reid Report (1945), commissioned towards

---

<sup>45</sup> Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel*, p. 167.

<sup>46</sup> Coal Industry Commission, *Reports and Minutes of Evidence*, Cmd. 360, p. iv.

the end of the Second World War to provide recommendations for the future technical efficiency of the industry – that proved to be the final nail in the coffin of private ownership.<sup>47</sup> Alongside the report's many recommendations – which included the necessity of reinvigorating the implementation of mechanised mining methods after progress on this front had slowed to a trickle during the late 1930s – was the warning that technical changes alone would not be sufficient to ensure the future efficiency of the industry. It was impossible, the report contended, to secure agreement on the closure of inefficient collieries or the merger of collieries into larger production units whilst the industry was in the hands of a large number of private owners.<sup>48</sup> The Labour Party's 1945 general election manifesto mirrored the statements made in the report:

For a quarter of a century the coal industry, producing Britain's most precious national raw material, has been floundering chaotically under the ownership of many hundreds of independent companies. Amalgamation under public ownership will bring great economies in operation and make it possible to modernise production methods and to raise safety standards in every colliery in the country.<sup>49</sup>

Following Labour's electoral victory in 1945, the government and the miners were finally in agreement on the necessity of reorganising the industry. The industry formally passed into public ownership on 1 January 1947 – a day that became known as Vesting Day – to much fanfare and jubilation from miners across the South Wales coalfield.

---

<sup>47</sup> Ministry of Fuel and Power, *Coal Mining*, Cmd. 6610.

<sup>48</sup> Ministry of Fuel and Power, *Coal Mining*, Cmd. 6610, pp. 137-140.

<sup>49</sup> *Let Us Face the Future: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation* (Labour Party, 1945), as reproduced in *British General Election Manifestos, 1918-1966*, ed. by F. W. S. Craig (Chichester: Political Reference Publications, 1970), p. 101.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

The significance that the South Wales miners initially attached to nationalisation is difficult to overstate. Miners whose working lives spanned across both private and public ownership of the industry recalled nationalisation in the context of the hardship of earlier decades: Llewellyn Morgans, a miner at International Colliery, Abercraf in 1947, recalled:

... you're not working for the old coal owners which, my God, they bled you to bloody death. And I'm not sorry to say those words, because they bled you to death. Here we have utopia as far as we were concerned, we were working for, its government controlled, and we were working for, well as one throughout the whole of the [trails off].<sup>50</sup>

Morgans' interviewer later asks him to expand on what the presence of a Labour government meant to him in light of his experiences in the 1930s.

Oh, there was a vast difference. Money wise we were better off because in the 1930s you were never sure of a week's wage. *Never* sure of a week's wage. But in 1947 ... well, it's a vast difference, I mean you had that security, you felt you had that security with the Labour government there.<sup>51</sup>

In a region where the dominant construction of masculinity was predicated on the ability to earn a wage through mining labour, the limited and insecure availability of employment in the coal industry during the interwar years posed a significant threat to miners' masculine status as wage-earners. In this way, job insecurity compounded the challenges that miners experienced at this time as a consequence of mechanisation. Morgans recalled nationalisation as a watershed moment; a moment when the harsh realities of working for the private owners was

---

<sup>50</sup> SWML, AUD/128, Llewellyn Morgans with comments from Berwyn Howells.

<sup>51</sup> SWML, AUD/128, Llewellyn Morgans with comments from Berwyn Howells.

replaced with a more benevolent system. The anticipation of such drastically changed circumstances prompts the notion that public ownership had ushered in the beginnings of utopia. Morgans' recollections reveal that he expected the nationalised industry to provide stable access to a wage earned through mining labour. The presence of the Labour government – which had fulfilled the party's longstanding commitment to nationalisation – was the factor that guaranteed these improved conditions – or so Morgans thought.<sup>52</sup> Public ownership, then, was a bulwark against threats to miners' status as breadwinners and a ballast for the established gender order.

An awareness of the fragility of miners' masculine status as wage-earners is also present in the recollections of younger miners – those who were children during the interwar years. Berwyn Howells was a child during the period of high unemployment in the 1930s and he joined the industry in 1939. His experience of nationalisation was shaped by his recollections of his older brother's unemployment: 'My job was safe. Oh, what a sigh of relief, oh. The number of men that were on the dole. My brother, my eldest brother, four years on the dole, suffering already. Job was safe.'<sup>53</sup> In Howell's recollections of his childhood, his father is conspicuously absent. It is not until the final moments of the interview that we learn that his father died of Miners' Lung when Howells was just ten years old. His father's death, Howells reveals, put the family under considerable financial strain; his eldest brother was forced by circumstance into the role of the

---

<sup>52</sup> In 1918, the nationalisation of the coal industry is included in the Labour Party's general election manifesto. It would appear in every subsequent Labour general election manifesto (with the exception of 1923) until their election in 1945: *British General Election Manifestos*, ed. by Craig.

<sup>53</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

family's main breadwinner. It is because of his brother's status as the main provider that Howells identified his extended period of unemployment as a crisis for the family.

Howells' recollections indicate that he feared the suffering that he, his mother and his siblings would experience if he too became unemployed. This fear stayed with him until the industry was nationalised. Whilst Howells' particular experience was shaped by personal tragedy, the ubiquity of poverty in the South Wales coalfield during the 1920s and 1930s meant that boys in the region grew up with an acute awareness of the importance of mining labour and the wage it provided.

A common refrain amongst miners was that the end of private ownership meant that 'utopia' had been achieved.<sup>54</sup> This is a striking term which is perhaps indicative of the political optimism of the immediate post-war period. This belief was widespread but not universal. Thomas Bowden, who joined the industry as a trainee miner at Bargoed training centre only months before nationalisation, recognised the strength of feeling amongst his colleagues, but did not experience it for himself. When asked what his impression of nationalisation was, Bowden responded:

Well, you know going in as a youngster a little bit dubious when you first start, you play around when you're in training, going through the motions, err, the first impression I had was how everybody in the mining industry thought this was going to be the beginning of utopia. It hasn't worked out that way but that's the feelin' I got off everybody else that was concerned about it.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> SWML, AUD/128, Llewellyn Morgans with comments from Berwyn Howells; SWML, AUD/20, Thomas George Bowden.

<sup>55</sup> SWML, AUD/20, Thomas George Bowden.

Memories of the Depression do not feature in Bowden's account of nationalisation; he was too young to directly recall these crisis years. Instead, Bowden's recollections of nationalisation are wrapped up with his memories of adjusting to the realities of minework. The language Bowden uses to describe this training period is revealing. When nationalisation took place, Bowden was still 'play[ing] around' and 'going through the motions' of minework, not yet securely demonstrating the key markers of masculinity associated with mining labour. He was, in essence, still a boy who had not fully earned his status as a fully-fledged miner/man within the workforce. As discussed in Chapter Two, the introduction of formal training schemes eased the transition between boyhood and manhood by providing specialised facilities in which boys could familiarise themselves with the underground environment and the nature of mining labour. Whilst these training centres lessened the severity of the adjustment period boys experienced, boys still had to develop the necessary confidence, strength, and skill required for the job. For Bowden, 'utopia' was difficult to reconcile with these early experiences of minework. He nevertheless recognised the significance nationalisation held for his more experienced colleagues.

Bowden was not the only miner who joined the industry when it was on the precipice of nationalisation who felt apathetic towards this development. Haydn Mathews, who begun work as a boy at Ferndale Colliery in 1946, was prompted to discuss his recollections of this period:

Well, everybody was waiting for the death knell, you know, of the private concern ... And everybody was waiting for this and waiting for it with open arms ... At that particular time the Chairman of the Ferndale Lodge ... Dai Peg they used to call him ... was a staunch

advocate for nationalisation and he couldn't wait for the day to dawn. And on the investing [sic] day, then, we had a meeting on the top of the pit and Dai was going forth with what nationalisation was going to give the mining industry, you know, and everybody had high hopes of it.<sup>56</sup>

Much like Bowden, Mathews recalled a great unity of feeling amongst his more experienced colleagues regarding the end of private ownership. Whilst Mathews did not overtly express doubt in the views of his colleagues as Bowden did, his recollections are more detached and observational in tone than the highly personal accounts of nationalisation offered by Morgans and Howells. Like Bowden, Mathews does not recall this period in the context of the hardship of the interwar years. Though he later reveals that he knew the interwar period to be a time of poverty and struggle, much of this understanding came not from direct recollection, but from stories told to him by his mother. Miners' awareness of the fragility of their masculine status as wage-earners appears to be less developed amongst those who were not old enough to recall the interwar years. Those who did not experience the era of mass unemployment and poverty in the South Wales coalfield were aware of the significance nationalisation held for the majority of the workforce but were less invested in the 'promise' of public ownership.

Historians who have documented the miners' campaign for nationalisation have been quick to qualify the achievement of 1947. Andrew J. Taylor has argued that the form the industry took – a public board model – 'did not meet the expectations or aspirations of many miners' across Britain's coalfields despite them feeling 'a great debt of gratitude to the Labour Party and Government'.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> SWML, AUD/134, Haydn Mathews, interviewed by Kim Howells, 22 October 1980.

<sup>57</sup> Taylor, 'The Miners and Nationalisation', *International Review of Social History*, p. 197.

Hywel Francis and David Smith's assessment of the reception of nationalisation in the South Wales coalfield, is in much the same vein:

What was surprising, and received with some measure of justifiable disbelief amongst many South Wales miners, was the way in which the changeover occurred. It soon became evident that the necessary break had not happened and that there were quite clear elements of continuity, particularly in management, policy and personnel.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, although miners soon became sceptical of the motives of Board management and the wisdom of the Labour Government of the time, a great fund of goodwill and even enthusiasm continued to exist for some time for *their* industry.<sup>59</sup>

This perspective has been informed by the arguments and justifications for nationalisation put forward by the miners' union since the 1890s. In the first of many unsuccessful nationalisation bills presented to parliament, Keir Hardie's 1893 bill emphasised that nationalisation could enable both 'the just treatment and consequent contentment of the mining population' and the reduction in mineral waste.<sup>60</sup> In other words, miners' initial calls for nationalisation centred on the argument that public ownership would be good for both mining communities and the nation. There was a significant, and highly vocal, portion of the union, however, that went on to develop these arguments into a more radical proposal: workers' control over the mining industry. Some of the most vocal advocates of this syndicalist approach came from the South Wales coalfield. Indeed, one of the syndicalist movements most influential documents, *The Miners' Next Step*, was

---

<sup>58</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. 436-437.

<sup>59</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 438.

<sup>60</sup> Keir Hardie's Bill, 1893 as reproduced in R. Page Arnot, *The Miners: Years of Struggle: A History of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain from 1910 onwards* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953), p. 149.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

written by Maerdy Colliery checkweighman, Noah Ablett, in 1912 with the input of other members of the Unofficial Reform Committee – a syndicalist group active in the coalfield which included Arthur Horner.<sup>61</sup> Whilst the growth of the syndicalist movement had been prompted by high levels of industrial conflict and the development of socialist thinking at the beginning of the century, a commitment to the principles of industrial democracy took on greater meaning in the aftermath of the First World War. The expansion of the franchise in 1918 gave all men over the age of twenty-one the vote. The MFGB, however, saw this as only a partial step towards freedom for its members. Writing in 1920, Frank Hodges, then General Secretary of the MFGB, argued: ‘The freedom of political democracy is a magnificent accomplishment, but it is now realised that the slavery of industry is harsher than the slavery of the unenfranchised serf. Hence the impulse of industry freedom’.<sup>62</sup>

The eventual form that nationalisation would take was markedly different to that envisioned by the MFGB in the opening decades of the century. As Ken Coates has argued, by the 1930s the idea of workers’ control had become rather unfashionable. The MFGB had been forced into a defensive position by the economic turmoil and industrial unrest that blighted the industry from 1921, whilst events in Stalin’s Russia meant that syndicalist proposals increasingly became politically untenable.<sup>63</sup> Andrew J. Taylor has noted that the MFGB had only a peripheral involvement in the formulation of the model of nationalisation that

---

<sup>61</sup> Noah Ablett, ‘The Miners’ Next Step’, (1912) as reproduced in *Democracy in the Mines: Some Documents of the Controversy on Mines Nationalisation up to the time of the Sankey Commission*, ed. by Ken Coates, pp. 16-30.

<sup>62</sup> Frank Hodges, *Nationalisation of the Mines* (London: Leonard Parsons, 1920), p. ix.

<sup>63</sup> *Democracy in the Mines*, ed. by Coates, p. 127.

would be implemented in 1947.<sup>64</sup> Instead, the key negotiations took place between the Labour Party and the TUC.<sup>65</sup> What the Labour Party hoped to achieve through this policy, however, was quite different to that of syndicalists within the MFGB and other parts of the trade union movement. Labour was primarily concerned with ensuring industrial efficiency in the name of the national interest. In 1936, after several years of negotiations, the Labour Party and TUC agreed upon a model of nationalisation that was acceptable – though not without criticism – to both the party and the trade union movement.<sup>66</sup> It was this model that would form the basis for the nationalisation of the mines in 1947.<sup>67</sup> This model envisioned nationalised industries run by a public board of experts to be appointed based on individual competency. In a concession to the trade union movement, it was accepted that trade union leaders would not be denied appointment to these public boards assuming they had appropriate expertise and were willing to relinquish their previous union positions. No legal guarantees, however, were to be made for the board to include workers' representation.<sup>68</sup>

The adoption of a public board model did lead to some disappointment – or, at least, qualified satisfaction – for a core group of South Wales union leaders and activists. The general secretary of the NUM, Arthur Horner, whose involvement with the syndicalist movement stemmed back to his friendship with Noah Ablett and

---

<sup>64</sup> Taylor, 'The Miners and Nationalisation', *International Review of Social History*, p. 188.

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of the negotiations between the Labour Party and the TUC, see: Taylor, 'The Miners and Nationalisation', pp. 178-188.

<sup>66</sup> These plans were published in *Coal: The Labour Plan* (London: National Council of Labour, 1936), pp. 27-31.

<sup>67</sup> *Coal Industry Nationalisation Act 1946* (9 and 10 Geo 6, c.59) (London: HMSO, 1946). Note particularly the section concerning the constitution of the board which contains no provision for guaranteeing workers' representation, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> Taylor, 'The Miners and Nationalisation', *International Review of Social History*, pp. 178-188.

the publication of *The Miners' Next Step* in 1912, used his autobiography to express his ambivalence towards the public board model and to justify his departure from his earlier convictions:

We did not ask for workers' control because we accepted that a nationalized industry in a capitalist society had to fit to that pattern ... Workers' control under socialism is one thing, but under capitalism it is another, and I had to recognize that nationalization in a capitalist society is not a complete victory.<sup>69</sup>

Horner describes the compromise as a situation where idealism gave way to pragmatism. His reaction to nationalisation was framed by his political convictions. Horner's response, however, is not reflective of the attitudes of the entire coalfield. The story it is possible to tell when the traditional union and political narrative is privileged is, of course, only partial. When the net is thrown wider to capture the views of miners who were neither activists nor coalfield leaders in 1947, different priorities emerge. Some, like Mathews, who started work at Ferndale just before nationalisation, did recall frustration amongst the miners over issues related to organisational structure. He recalled that some disillusionment with nationalisation was present almost immediately because 'the Coal Board created so many chiefs. You had an inspector of this, an inspector of that, you know, until it became like a music-hall joke ... And after all was said and done you had the cry from the boys on the coal face, "We are paying for all the wages of these hangers-on"'.<sup>70</sup> For the most part, however, the testimonies of miners who were neither leaders nor activists during the campaign for nationalisation say very little on the topic of the industry's structure.

---

<sup>69</sup> Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel*, p. 168.

<sup>70</sup> SWML, AUD/134, Haydn Mathews.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

For miners like Howells and Morgans, the promise of nationalisation centred on its ability to improve their living standards and working conditions. There is nothing in their recollections of this period to indicate that the failure to re-structure existing power relations within the industry negatively affected their response to nationalisation. For Howells, the question of the industry's structure in 1947 does not feature in his testimony at all.<sup>71</sup> Morgans' interest in the form nationalisation took appears to have been passing at best. He described the new system as being 'government controlled' though, as discussed above, the agreed upon model of the industry after 1947 was that of a public board.<sup>72</sup> In other words, the industry was not placed under the direct control of a government ministry. Far from resenting the model imposed by the nationalisation bill, Morgans' recollections reveal that he was relieved, even proud, that nationalisation had been achieved with the backing of a Labour government. In essence, the presence of a government perceived by miners to be favourable to their interests was experienced as a guarantee of job security. Uprooting the hierarchy within the industry was secondary – perhaps even antithetical – to miners whose priorities were, through necessity, focused on establishing stable access to mining labour and income.

In the years leading up to 1947, there was little reason for miners to doubt that nationalisation would improve their working conditions and job security. Though the proposals for nationalisation had gone through various iterations since Keir Hardie's claim that nationalisation would ensure the 'just treatment' of the

---

<sup>71</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

<sup>72</sup> SWML, AUD/128, Llewellyn Morgans with comments from Berwyn Howells.

workforce, the improvement of miners' working conditions had remained a central goal of the campaign. Indeed, the plans for nationalisation published by the Labour Party and TUC in 1936 explicitly stated that 'the essential objective [was] to place the industry on a really sound basis, and to provide a civilised standard of life and of working conditions for all engaged in it'.<sup>73</sup> Yet, in the twenty years following nationalisation miners' hopes for job security would be dashed as they bore witness to successive closure programmes that saw the South Wales coalfield reduced to a fraction of its pre-war size. Between 1947 and 1969, the number of collieries in the coalfield almost halved and manpower fell by more than sixty percent with a loss of 68,000 jobs.<sup>74</sup> The statistical evidence of continuing decline, however, masks the more complex narrative pertaining to miners' experiences of living and working in the coalfield at this time. Hope did not turn to despair in such a linear fashion. Different miners perceived the threat to their livelihood, working identity and status at different times and in different ways.

Colliery closures were a permanent feature of the mining industry. Put simply, coal is a finite resource. Once the coal has been exhausted there is no reason for a colliery to remain in operation. Furthermore, the economic value of a colliery diminished over time as the highest quality and easiest to access coal was removed first.<sup>75</sup> What is worthy of note – as, indeed, the Reid Report does – is that so many mines with exhausted reserves or no possibility of profitable working were allowed, during private ownership, to continue operation long past the point at

---

<sup>73</sup> *Coal: The Labour Plan*, p. 25.

<sup>74</sup> SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Colliery Closures'; SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Annual Manpower'.

<sup>75</sup> *Coal: The Labour Plan*, p. 6.

which expediency would have recommended their closure.<sup>76</sup> In 1947, these collieries became the problem of the NCB. In the first four years after nationalisation, thirty-four collieries closed in the South Wales coalfield and further closures took place almost every year throughout the 1950s.<sup>77</sup> Whilst these early closures were disruptive for the affected workforces and resulted in resistance at a local level,<sup>78</sup> they feature only in a limited way in miners' testimonies. Miners occasionally recalled these initial closures as part of the timeline of closures that took place in the coalfield, but beyond the workforces immediately affected by the closures, there is little indication that these closures eroded the expectation of job security amongst miners more broadly.<sup>79</sup> The narrative surrounding nationalisation was one of rejuvenation. These closures were not reviewed as a symptom of decline, but rather as a curative action that signalled a stable future for the mining industry in South Wales.

For Llewellyn Morgans, it was the return of a Conservative government in 1951 that first sparked concern for the industry and his position within it. When asked how the Conservative's election victory made him feel, Morgans responded:

LM: Absolutely bitter. I mean we could foresee as we thought that we'd go back to the same conditions that we were previous to nationalisation. Well, it so happened that they sold back the Steel Company to private enterprise, they lopped off the best parts of the nationalised industries and sold them back, which to us was absolutely wrong.

---

<sup>76</sup> Ministry of Fuel and Power, *Coal Mining*, Cmd. 6610, p. 137.

<sup>77</sup> SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Colliery Closures'.

<sup>78</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. 436-437.

<sup>79</sup> See for example: SWML, AUD/381, Don Hayward and Emlyn Jenkins, interviewed by Hywel Francis, 19 June 1976. Hayward and Jenkins discuss the unsuccessful unofficial action undertaken to prevent the transfer of a portion of Wern Tarw men to Llanharan colliery in 1951. Though the issue was one of transference rather than closure, they recall the incident as part of the broader timeline of pit closures in the coalfield. The Wern Tarw issue is discussed in Chapter Four.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

I: Did you ever feel that they were going to do that to the coal industry?

LM: Yes. Yes, there was always that fear there. Definitely.<sup>80</sup>

Morgans' recollections reveal that his perception of job security within the industry continued to be tied to the presence of a Labour government. Their defeat in 1951 made the achievements of nationalisation and, by extension, the stability he perceived nationalisation to afford to his livelihood and status as a miner, feel fragile. The re-privatisation of the steel industry in 1952 – after it, too, had been nationalised by the post-war Labour government – served to emphasise the miners' vulnerability. Despite Morgans' fears, the Conservative government did not re-privatise the coal industry following their return to power, and the NCB continued to invest heavily in mechanisation and reconstruction projects.<sup>81</sup> There was, then, a period of about ten years between 1947 and 1957 – the period that economic historians of the coalfield have described as being 'characterised by prosperity and a rapid expansion of capacity' – where miners' perceptions of their position within the industry were influenced by a mix of both fear and hope.

When the economic challenges facing the industry in the late 1950s became apparent, the NCB's priorities started to shift. Rather than seeking to maximise production levels, the NCB became increasingly focused on the cost of coal production.<sup>82</sup> Since 1947, closures had predominantly been dictated by the requirements of reconstruction. As the NCB's priorities changed, so too did the rationale for pit closures. Pits producing the most expensive coal were suddenly in

---

<sup>80</sup> SWML, AUD/128, Llewellyn Morgans with comments from Berwyn Howells.

<sup>81</sup> Buxton, *Economic Development*, pp. 234-235.

<sup>82</sup> Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics*, p. 184.

jeopardy. In December 1958, the NCB announced that thirty-six pits were to close in the new year. A third of these were to take place in the South Wales coalfield.<sup>83</sup> Though the NCB's policy was to offer miners affected by pit closures transfers to other collieries, the scale of the 1959 closure programme in South Wales meant that this was only possible for a portion of the workforce. The rest became unemployed.<sup>84</sup>

When miners reflected on the closures that took place in the coalfield after 1947, the 1959 closure programme was frequently pinpointed as the moment when the promise of nationalisation was broken. Don Hayward acknowledged the history of pit closures in the coalfield and reflected on why he thought closures from 1959 produced concern amongst the miners:

But in those days, prior to nationalisation, we never took notice of pit closures. There was so many pits around that a pit closure meant nothing in those days because there was plenty of work in the mines, and plenty of collieries to absorb the men without travelling long distances like. But after '59 when they started, when they closed a hundred pits in South Wales haven't they since 1959 ... But you know, it never hit us until after '59 ...<sup>85</sup>

At first glance, Hayward's account of the pre-nationalisation era appears to stand in direct contradiction with the dominant narrative of poverty and mass unemployment in interwar South Wales. The claim that there was plenty of minework available in the region during these years is not credible. Instead, Hayward's reflections should be understood as a commentary, not on the level of employment within the coalfield, but on the number of pits in existence. On the eve of nationalisation, there were approximately 200 pits in operation in South

---

<sup>83</sup> SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Colliery Closures'.

<sup>84</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. 448-449.

<sup>85</sup> SWML, AUD/381, Don Hayward and Emlyn Jenkins.

Wales.<sup>86</sup> Minework – when market conditions and industrial relations allowed – was, theoretically, widely available. When one colliery closed through exhaustion, miners could typically seek work at a number of other local collieries. In 1959, however, the industry had shrunk sufficiently that there were not always other collieries conveniently located nearby.<sup>87</sup> For Hayward, job security was lost at the point at which the industry became noticeably too small to feasibly and conveniently absorb the men whose collieries were closing. His language – ‘it never hit us until after ‘59’ – indicates that return of job insecurity was experienced as a sudden and unexpected realisation.

In a similar manner, Howells, the miner whose eldest brother was unemployed for several years when the mines were privately owned, recalled these closures as a turning point for the South Wales miners: ‘‘59 was a time of realisation in most of the coalfield. A time of that, what we said in ‘47 my job was safe, not anymore’.<sup>88</sup> This was a moment of collective disillusionment. Howells recalls this as the moment in which his hopes for job security through nationalisation were dashed. In doing so, the echo of the hardships of earlier decades – whilst not directly expressed in this statement – can be heard. In Horner’s autobiography published in 1960, this echo is made explicit: ‘Those of us who came through those years of depression – and they began before 1921 and lasted till the outbreak of war – can never get them out of our memory. When we hear today of pits closing down it is inevitable that the fear of a return of those

---

<sup>86</sup> Approximation calculated based on list of colliery closures since 1947. SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, ‘Colliery Closures’.

<sup>87</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 449.

<sup>88</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

years comes back'.<sup>89</sup> The pit closure announcements of the late 1950s and 1960s posed a threat to miners' masculine status as financial providers that was at once familiar and tangible.

Miners like Hayward and Howells recall the decades after nationalisation as being characterised first by job security (approximately 1947-1958) and then by job *insecurity* (1959 onwards). For others, however, mass pit closures forced them to consider whether nationalisation had ever truly guaranteed them stable access to mining labour. Morgans – the miner who remembered being unable to rely on a steady wage in the 1930s – gave an account in which it is possible to separate his retrospective understanding of nationalisation from his contemporary reflection: 'But in 1947 ... I mean you had that security, you felt you had that security ...'.<sup>90</sup> The equivocation Morgans adds to the repeated phrase ('you *felt* you had' – my emphasis), indicates how his experiences of the industry in the decades since nationalisation served to repattern his perspective on the stability of his employment. When Bowden – the miner who joined the industry in the months before nationalisation and was always dubious of its apparent benefits – reflected on his experiences of the industry over three decades, he concluded that the 'utopia' his fellow miners believed had been ushered in by the end of private ownership 'hasn't worked out that way'.<sup>91</sup> For many miners, nationalisation was a pivotal moment that redefined their relationship with the industry. Whilst the maintenance of pre-existing power relations between workers and management had disabused some members of the workforce of their belief in the radical

---

<sup>89</sup> Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel*, p. 96.

<sup>90</sup> SWML, AUD/128, Llewellyn Morgans with comments from Berwyn Howells.

<sup>91</sup> SWML, AUD/20, Thomas George Bowden.

potential of nationalisation, the belief that public ownership of the industry had improved miners' status and ensured stable access to mining labour lingered in miners' minds. For those who lived through the hardship of the interwar years, nationalisation was received with gratitude, and the threat posed by pit closures in this period revealed that the promise of nationalisation was either broken or had always been an illusion.

The threat pit closures posed to miners' livelihoods, to their ability to fulfil the requirements of a construction of masculinity predicated on earning a wage through mining labour, led many miners in South Wales to look to the NUM for an appropriate response. In a decision that would become increasingly unpopular as closures continued over numerous years, the NUM adopted a policy which mitigated against collective action. The run-down of the industry presented the union with its biggest challenge since nationalisation and was to be its principal concern for much of the next decade.<sup>92</sup> Rather than trying to reverse the NCB's closure announcement in 1958, the NUM accepted the closures and sought to minimise their impact on the workforce and community.<sup>93</sup> In essence, the policy decided in the late-1950s was one of quiescence. This policy was to remain remarkably consistent as pit closures continued apace throughout the next decade. Strike action was effectively ruled out. Various factors coalesced to prevent more concerted collective action from taking shape at a national level.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Paynter, *My Generation*, p. 135.

<sup>93</sup> Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics*, p. 186.

<sup>94</sup> The discussion of the rationale underpinning the union's approach to the pit closure issue included in this chapter is, by necessity, brief. It has been extensively explored by various historians of the coalfield. For a discussion of the national picture, see: Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics: Volume 1*, pp. 179-229. For South Wales, see Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. 448-454; Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, pp. 47-89.

Though pit closures put the NUM on a collision course with the NCB, entering into direct conflict with the Coal Board was considered to be incompatible with the union's commitment to the principles of public ownership. The miners had gained much in terms of working conditions, wages and safety since nationalisation.

Arthur Horner reflected in his autobiography on these changes in the industry:

'From vesting day to the time I retired [in 1959], I watched the gradual implementation of the aims that we had formulated years before when the industry was derelict. Things we never dreamed possible became perfectly feasible under nationalization'.<sup>95</sup> The NUM's approach to navigating the pit closure issue was shaped in no small part by their desire not to undermine the nationalisation project.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, though the colliery closures were being decided by the NCB, the union perceived responsibility for the run-down of the industry to lie with the Conservative government. In the late 1950s, the NUM considered the falling demand for coal to be a product of unfavourable government policies and were concerned that engaging in a 'political strike' would draw the government directly into the management of the industry.<sup>97</sup>

The question of whether or not strike action was an appropriate tool to combat pit closures given the economic and political circumstances of the industry was, in some respects, a moot point. The union leadership – concerned as they were with maintaining the NUM's internal unity – were all too aware that support for industrial action over pit closures would vary not just between the worst and least affected regions, but also at a local level between safe and at-risk

---

<sup>95</sup> Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel*, p. 208.

<sup>96</sup> Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics: Volume 1*, p. 179.

<sup>97</sup> Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics: Volume 1*, p. 183.

pits.<sup>98</sup> Will Paynter, President of the South Wales Area, recalled that in the early months of 1959 the South Wales coalfield did consider resistance through strike action at a delegate conference: ‘... the reaction was against it, understandably, because there were many uneconomic pits whose miners feared that action of that kind could precipitate their own closure. This was a constant factor throughout the whole period.’<sup>99</sup> Paynter also later commented that his own reservations concerning strike action stemmed from the concern ‘... that certain pits would be closed in the process and miners affected by this would hold the union responsible for their close-down’.<sup>100</sup> The policy of quiescence was also, therefore, a reflection of the reality of uneven support for strike action.

The union’s decision to focus on mitigating the impact of pit closures was anticipated to be a short-term solution. The election of a Labour government was expected to produce ‘a reversal in the fortunes of the coal industry’.<sup>101</sup> The NUM’s expectations, however, would prove to be misplaced. Though the party had committed, whilst in opposition, to a national fuel policy that would sustain coal production at a level that would ensure stability in the industry, once in government (1964), this was quickly abandoned.<sup>102</sup> Far from reversing the decline

---

<sup>98</sup> Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics*, pp. 189-190.

<sup>99</sup> The conference took place during Paynter’s final weeks as President of the South Wales Area. He took up his new role as General Secretary of the NUM in April 1959, a position he held throughout the period of mass pit closures until he was succeeded by Lawrence Daly in 1968. Quote from: Paynter, *My Generation*, p. 135.

<sup>100</sup> Paynter, *My Generation*, p. 142.

<sup>101</sup> Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 54.

<sup>102</sup> Historians have noted that the NUM considered the Labour Party to have committed themselves to a production rate of 200 million tonnes. See, for example, Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 452. Ben Curtis states that the 200 million tonne figure is mentioned in the 1964 manifesto: Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 54. This appears to be an error. Whilst the Labour Party general election manifestos of 1959 and 1964 both committed the party to a national fuel policy, neither specifically mentioned the 200 million tonne production commitment: *Britain Belongs to You: The Labour Party’s Policy for Consideration by the British People* (Labour Party, 1959) and *Let’s Go with Labour*

of the industry, Labour pressed the accelerator; forty-four pits closed in the South Wales coalfield between 1965 and 1970.<sup>103</sup> Though pit closures continued apace, the NUM's policy remained that of lobbying the government to rethink the closure programmes and working to minimise the impact of closures on miners and mining communities. As Curtis highlights, the union's motivation for co-operating with the NCB now included not just a desire to protect the nationalisation project, but loyalty to the Labour government and a commitment to their re-election.<sup>104</sup> The ironic consequences of the union's policy throughout this period has been noted by Vic Allen. The miners were encouraged not to see pit closures in their political context, but rather to accept the circumstances facing the industry. While the union's strategy was adopted partially out of a desire to maintain internal unity, by mitigating against a collective response to pit closures '[t]he issue was converted to one of self-preservation, of looking after oneself and one's family'.<sup>105</sup> In this way, – and as will be further elucidated – the union's policy of inaction encouraged individual miners to prioritise their ability to fulfil the breadwinner role at the expense of other aspects of their masculine identity. The decisions that miners made out of self-preservation – when they were faced with the loss of their pit and the knowledge that the NUM would not formally contest the closure – will be explored in Chapter Four.

Reactions to the NUM's policy of quiescence reveal the tension that existed within the coalfield at this time because of the opposing cultural tendencies

---

*for the New Britain* (Labour Party, 1964), as reproduced in *British General Election Manifestos*, ed. by Craig, p. 201 and p. 233.

<sup>103</sup> SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Colliery Closures'.

<sup>104</sup> Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 47 and pp. 56-57.

<sup>105</sup> Vic Allen, *The Militancy of British Miners* (Shipley: The Moor Press, 1981), p. 65.

towards individualism and collectivism. The testimonies reveal that, for some, individualism was antithetical to their understanding of what it meant to be a miner and union member. Elwyn Gwyn Williams was the lodge secretary at Taff Merthyr in 1963 when the colliery was placed on a 'jeopardy list' of pits slated for closure. Following a concerted effort by the lodge and its membership to increase production at the pit, Taff Merthyr was removed from the jeopardy list in 1965 and was still in operation at the time of Williams' interview in 1981.<sup>106</sup> When asked whether the closure of pits 'all around' Taff Merthyr in the 1960s made his 'determination to keep this place open more acute', Williams responded: 'No because the men at the time as far as pit closures were concerned, I don't think anybody basically in South Wales was too concerned. They weren't. That we were prepared to accept them at that time'.<sup>107</sup> Williams was all too aware that the union's policy on pit closures prevented a coalfield-wide collective response. His tone was incredulous – the pitch of his voice rising at the end of each sentence. The response Williams gives indicates that he interpreted the question to be asking whether his motivation for fighting Taff Merthyr's placement on the jeopardy list included the desire to save the pit for the sake of the South Wales miners as a whole. His reply in the negative indicates the isolation of the Taff Merthyr workforce and that he had little appetite to defend the interests of those who would not return the favour.

Collectivism was embedded into the culture of South Wales mining communities as a means of managing the threats posed by hardship and poverty.

---

<sup>106</sup> SWML, AUD/66, Elwyn Gwyn Williams.

<sup>107</sup> SWML, AUD/66, Elwyn Gwyn Williams.

Whilst this collective and interdependent approach to community life has been identified as a feature of working-class culture more broadly,<sup>108</sup> the peculiarities of the South Wales coalfield lend it a distinctly regional flavour. Here, collectivism was forged during the years of private ownership as a necessary tool for defending against the worst excesses of the colliery owners and the dangers of minework. At perhaps its most fundamental, collective responsibility was a feature of working life underground as miners relied on the skills and experience of their colleagues to help protect life and limb. Danger from roof falls, for example – particularly in longwall mining where lots of men worked on the same length of the coal face – was mitigated against by miners' abilities to read the roof conditions by listening to the sounds of the mine. Those miners whose hearing had deteriorated were considered something of a hazard: 'your safety wasn't dependent only on yourself, if the chap next to you was a bit deaf, he could cause trouble for you and accidents as well like'.<sup>109</sup> Responsibility for personal safety was a reciprocal arrangement between miners. As collieries were homosocial environments, expressions of collectivism took on an inherently gendered form. For working miners, the development of the markers of manliness associated with the performance of mining labour (skill etc.) became a moral imperative. Put another way, as a means of protecting lives and livelihoods, collectivism provided the moral underpinning for miners' working identities and masculinities. The gendered performance of

---

<sup>108</sup> For a discussion of the historiography concerning working-class collectivism, see: Stefan Ramsden, 'Remaking Working-Class Community: Sociability, Belonging and 'Affluence' in a Small Town, 1930-80', *Contemporary British History* 29. 1 (2015), pp. 1-3.

<sup>109</sup> SWML, AUD/20, Thomas George Bowden.

collectivism that Sue Bruley notes for the 1926 lockout was an extension of that which developed in the pits.<sup>110</sup>

Though collectivism took many forms, it found institutional embodiment in the miners' union. First, in the SWMF (or the Fed, as it was known), and later in the NUM. Under private ownership, the union was the miners' only effective method of combatting the effects of the owners' drive for profitability. Small scale, localised strikes – often unofficial in nature – were the predominant means by which miners pushed back against the demands of the coal owners and colliery management.<sup>111</sup> The shared experiences and challenges of mine work sometimes, however, produced spectacular displays of coalfield – even national – unity amongst the miners such as during the lockouts of 1921 and 1926. Francis and Smith have argued that the events of 1926 revealed 'an alternative cultural pattern' of class and community consciousness in South Wales – a 'collectivist conception which burnt into the collective memory of the whole region'.<sup>112</sup> In more recent years, historians have encouraged a more circumspect view of the alternative culture thesis, cautioning against overstating its 'alternative' features. Bruley, for example, adopts a cautious approach with the view that 'in some respects coalfield society at this time did possess significant 'alternative' features'.<sup>113</sup> Francis was also of the view that the culture of South Wales mining communities was rapidly changing as a result of pit closures in the 1950s and 1960s; the rationale underpinning both his collection of coalfield materials and testimonies, and the publication of *The Fed*

---

<sup>110</sup> Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926*.

<sup>111</sup> Roy Church and Quentin Outram, *Strikes and Solidarity: Coalfield Conflict in Britain 1889-1966* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 5.

<sup>112</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>113</sup> Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926*, p. 13.

included the preservation of this alternative culture.<sup>114</sup> There are echoes here of a broader debate concerning working-class community culture in twentieth century Britain. Whilst few would dispute that collectivism was a feature of working-class culture (particularly during the opening decades of the century), the notion of a relatively standardised working-class culture based on communality and interdependence has been complicated by historians. Questions have been raised regarding both its prevalence and durability.<sup>115</sup> There have equally been historians who have pushed back against the mid-century decline of community thesis.<sup>116</sup> It is perhaps most accurate to say that collectivism formed part of a cultural pattern of acceptable sociability in the coalfield that, at times (such as in 1926) presented itself as the dominant cultural norm. Certainly, the internal division within the union over pit closures indicates a more fragmentary adherence to the principles of collectivism in the 1950s and 1960s. It is clear from the testimonies which discuss these closures, however, that some miners remained deeply committed to collectivist principles even when union policy had the unintended consequence of encouraging more individualistic tendencies.

For Howells, the union's quiescence on the issue of pit closures was impossible to reconcile with the moral principle of collectivism that underpinned his understanding of his position and role within the mining industry. The

---

<sup>114</sup> Departments of History and Economic History, *The South Wales Coalfield History Project: Final Report*, (University College, Swansea, 1974), p. iii; Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. xvi-xix.

<sup>115</sup> See for example: Jon Lawrence, 'Class, "Affluence" and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain, c.1930-64', *Cultural and Social History*, 10. 2 (2013), pp. 273-299; John H. Goldthorpe, 'Intellectuals and the Working Class in Modern Britain', in *Social Stratification and Economic Change*, ed. by David Rose (London: Hutchinson, 1988), p. 47; Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 14-15 and 199-229.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example Ramsden, 'Remaking Working-Class Community', *Contemporary British History*, pp. 1-26.

dissonance caused by the union's policy was exaggerated by his role as a lodge official. The close connection of lodge officials to the workforce and community meant that they were well-placed to witness the impact of pit closures and union policy on the men they represented. Howells' response to a question posed on the issue of unity in the coalfield reveals the extent to which this issue shook his belief in the ability of the union to protect the interests of miners:

Interviewer: How united was the coalfield, or disunited, during the early sixties?

Howells: [After a large inhale and exhale of breath] We allowed the closures.<sup>117</sup>

The audible breath Howells takes before replying is perhaps the most revealing aspect of his response. In this moment his distress is palpable. The transcript alone fails to capture the sense of shame that pervades Howells' response, nor does it capture the meaning that Howells imbues his response with. In his eyes, his response is an admission of failure and of guilt. Howells' distress can perhaps best be understood with a concept more commonly used in the field of medical ethics. Moral injury (or moral distress) has been closely associated with the experiences of nurses and other medical professionals who experience a conflict between their personal morals and the expectations of their professional role. Andrew Jameton states that the concept had its origins in nursing ethics in the 1970s and 1980s, and notes that acknowledgement of nurses' experiences of job-related distress can also be found in much older literature.<sup>118</sup> It describes a condition that emerges

---

<sup>117</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

<sup>118</sup> Andrew Jameton: 'A Reflection on Moral Distress in Nursing Together With a Current Application of Concept', *Bioethical Inquiry*, 10. 3 (2013), pp. 297-308 (pp. 297-298).

when ‘one knows the right thing to do, but institutional [or other] constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action’.<sup>119</sup> Moral injury has also been explored in relation to military personnel and first responders, partially because of the more extreme – even life-or-death – ethical decisions that people in these occupations face.<sup>120</sup> As Tom Koch establishes, moral injury is not limited to any single profession however and can emerge in response to more ‘mundane’ situations.<sup>121</sup> In Howells’ case, by fulfilling the requirements of his position as lodge officer, he perceived himself to have failed in fulfilling the moral requirements of acceptable masculinity.

For Howells, formative experiences during childhood appear to have forged a commitment to collectivism that shaped his perception of his working identity and masculinity throughout his life. When discussing his first experiences of colliery work, he recalled lessons he learnt from both his mother and his butty (a more experienced working partner) that shaped his attitude towards collective action and trade unionism:

I, er, my mother was a member of the Labour Party for years and years, and er she’d always been concerned, she was one of the women who went to London to ensure that the pit head baths had come to Garw Ocean, cause my father had been working there before. And naturally, I went to the [union] shed and had my card soon as I started work. And on the first Friday my butty took me there, but I knew what to do even then my mother told me. So I bought my thruppenny stamp, and er every Friday my thruppence was paid and er I got my stamp. Now they have a shed outside the canteen for this purpose, and in fact that’s where I work from now,

---

<sup>119</sup> Andrew Jameton, *Nursing Practice: The Ethical Issues* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984), p. 6.

<sup>120</sup> See, for example: Tine Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict: Political Practices and Public Perceptions*, (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2021).

<sup>121</sup> Tom Koch, *Ethics in Everyday Places: Mapping Moral Stress, Distress, and Injury* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), p. 3.

the same shed!<sup>122</sup>

Howells' account demonstrates trade union membership to be a marker of community participation for the men of the coalfield. The habitual weekly payment of his union dues was a ritualised performance of social practice – one that his mother was keen to educate her son about in order to ensure his community membership. Given the all-male environment of the workplace and union, boys would typically have been guided through the process of joining the union and paying dues by an older man – either a male relative or their butty. Indeed, Howells' recollections reveal that his butty did just this. However, Howells also recalls with pride that his political and union education began at home with his mother. As his father had died when he was ten, Howells' mother took on the role of educating him about joining the union. He provides an overview of his mother's political credentials as both an indication of her capability of fulfilling this role and as a means of placing his own union credentials within a family narrative of commitment to the union and the mining community. This narrative is one that Howells identified with throughout his life, as indicated by his emotional attachment to the union shed where he first paid his dues and where he worked as a union official at the time of interview.

Howells' understanding of the role the union played in the community was developed through his early experiences of minework. An incident of showcards took place not long after he began work as a collier's boy in the Garw Ocean colliery. A temporary stoppage occurred when it was revealed that some men had

---

<sup>122</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

not paid their union dues. The Overman tried 'to bully the men back into work', but the men refused until the lodge Secretary, Alf Davies (later President of the South Wales Area of the NUM), informed them that 'the scabs ... were coming out to pay the union and that everything was alright'.<sup>123</sup> As Howells recalled:

That was my first lesson in trade unionism because what my butty told me ... is this, that if we didn't all stick together, that Overman shouting, he wouldn't have been shouting he would have been sending you home and sacking you and things like that. So a very good lesson.<sup>124</sup>

The showcards incident was another formative moment for Howells – the moment when the significance of collectivism, and the union's embodiment of this principle, was impressed upon him. His involvement in the union went on to span much of his working life. He worked at Garw Ocean only briefly before the colliery went on to short time and he moved to Glengarw seeking more stable employment. Here he accepted a position as a youth member of the lodge committee. Following this, Howells held various positions on lodge committees before becoming Lodge Secretary at Ffalfau colliery in 1963. Through the showcards incident he learnt the parameters – defined in this case by the transgressions of the 'scabs' – of the construction of acceptable masculinity in the society in which he lived and worked.

The tension Howells experienced when his personal convictions did not align with union policy is a recurring theme in his testimony. These incidents of conflict spanned across his working career, beginning with the Boys' Strikes during

---

<sup>123</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

<sup>124</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

the Second World War. The lightning strikes that began in May and June 1942, caused by widespread dissatisfaction with working conditions and wages amongst the younger members of the workforce, put boys – including Howells – on a collision course with the union.<sup>125</sup> The SWMF was not supportive of the boys' actions, and the boys believed the union had failed in their responsibility to represent their interests. Howells' account of the Boys' Strike at Glengarw Colliery emphasises this antagonistic relationship between the boys and the union. When meeting with the Lodge Secretary, Will Watkins, to discuss the strike, Howells was offered a position on the lodge committee as a youth representative – a position he initially turned down because he was dissatisfied with Watkins' belated commitment to address the boys' concerns.<sup>126</sup> Though the Boys' Strikes had no clear leadership,<sup>127</sup> Howells' meeting with the Glengarw Lodge Secretary and the offer of a position on the committee indicate that his vocal defence of his colleagues and his commitment to collective action were evident to those around him from this young age. Indeed, this memory fulfils an important function in Howells' narrative. It functions to confirm his commitment to collectivism by demonstrating an instance where he acted in line with his values. As a union member rather than a union official, Howells was less constrained from acting against union policy. When he found the union lacking in its defence of boys'

---

<sup>125</sup> The pay miners' boys received was often not reflective of the work they performed, and the arrival of munitions factories in the region fanned discontent as munitions workers – many of whom were female – had similar if not greater earning potential than young miners. See: Stuart Broomfield, 'The Apprentice Boys' Strikes of the Second World War', *Llafur*, 3. 2 (1981), pp. 53-67 (p. 56); Ariane Mak, 'Conspicuous Consumption in Wartime? Welsh Mining Communities and Women in Munitions Factories', in *Gender and the Second World War: Lessons of War*, ed. by Corinna Peniston-Bird & Emma Vickers, (London: Palgrave, 2017), pp. 55-72 (pp. 57-63).

<sup>126</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

<sup>127</sup> Broomfield, 'The Apprentice Boys' Strikes', *Llafur*, p. 58.

interests, he was prepared to hold them to account by participating in unofficial forms of collective action. In doing so, he was able to maintain his perception of his own moral fulfilment of masculinity.

Once on the committee, Howells experienced multiple occasions where his personal values were constrained by institutional requirements. The tension caused by the union's quiescence on the issue of pit closures was not an isolated incident. On the issue of wage negotiations which were ongoing through the late 1950s and 1960s, Howells recalled how he used to speak up during committee meetings when he felt that the union was failing to gain the increases in pay that he felt miners deserved. He also recalled, however, the limits of this approach: '...you'd get up and say so in the lodge meetings and ... I was a committee man of course, and most of the arguments were in committee, and when I got to a general meeting, I was hand, tied hand and foot ...'.<sup>128</sup> In the more public setting of a general meeting, Howells was constrained from speaking or acting in accordance with his values by the majority ruling of the lodge committee. For Howells' sense of self, it was not sufficient to push back against union policy within the private confines of committee meetings. Howells wanted to be able to publicly demonstrate his commitment to his values in front of the men he was both responsible for and accountable to.

The process of recounting his life story is a distressing experience for Howells. In order to best understand this experience of distress we need to consider the nature of life-story telling as it is commonly understood today. As

---

<sup>128</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

discussed earlier, life-story telling is perceived to have a dual purpose: first, the reimagining of past events to form a formal narrative, and secondly, the presentation of a version of the self that the narrator feels comfortable with. This has been termed *composure*.<sup>129</sup> Penny Summerfield argues that whilst oral history 'offers interviewees the chance of achieving *composure*', its achievement is not guaranteed.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, life-story telling can also result in what Summerfield has termed '*discomposure*', a situation which occurs when the interviewee finds it impossible to construct a narrative of self with which they are comfortable.<sup>131</sup> Distress, such as that demonstrated by Howells is a clear marker of such *discomposure*. Silence is another potential marker of *discomposure* identified by Summerfield which shall be revisited later.<sup>132</sup> Seen in this light, the memories Howells selected pertaining to occasions when he *did* act in accordance with his collectivist principles appear to have been chosen as an attempt at self-rehabilitation. These recollections function as a public declaration that he did, at least, *wish* to take what he perceived as the morally responsible course of action over pit closures.

Whilst Howells' position meant he felt unable to act in accordance with his values, he did witness other miners publicly demonstrating their discontent with union quiescence over pit closures. When asked how passionately men defended their pits, Howells responded: 'Ohh, I've got to give it to them. Oh, some of the boys

---

<sup>129</sup> Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>130</sup> Summerfield, *Histories of the Self*, p. 109.

<sup>131</sup> Summerfield, *Histories of Self*, p. 110. See also, Penny Summerfield, 'Dis/composing the Subject: Intersubjectivities in Oral History', in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, ed. by T. Cosslett, C. Lury and P. Summerfield (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 91-106.

<sup>132</sup> Summerfield, *Histories of Self*, p. 110.

there they were nearly crying man, you know they were coming to conference and waving their banners. But they were absolutely sincere, you know'.<sup>133</sup> The respect he accords these men is apparent in the sincerity he assigns to their actions. Their heightened emotions appear to have convinced Howells of the strength of their convictions. We see here again that, for Howells, the fulfilment of morally-acceptable masculinity could only be confirmed through performative action.

Howells' testimony contains the most emotive account of dissatisfaction in the oral testimonies explored for this thesis, but he was one of many in South Wales who disapproved of the union's policy of quiescence. Whilst Howells was constrained by the lack of support from within his own lodge committee, not all lodge committees were divided in this way. Curtis has noted that the lodges in the centre of the coalfield tended towards greater militancy in this period, whilst the eastern and western edges were more moderately inclined.<sup>134</sup> For these miners, it was possible to achieve composure in the life-story telling process. Whilst coalfield-wide unity on the divisive issue of pit closures was impossible, Elwyn Gwyn Williams' experience at Taff Merthyr – the colliery that was removed from the jeopardy list after the workforce worked together to reverse its fate – demonstrated that localised forms of collective action could have significant success. He recalled how news of the Taff Merthyr's uncertain future affected the miners who worked there and their determination to save the pit:

But the men struggled in that district, because we was on jeopardy ... the men felt ashamed virtually with what Taff Merthyr had achieved and being *the* pit in South Wales as far as wages are

---

<sup>133</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

<sup>134</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, pp. 26-27.

concerned etcetera, and producing at that time mind, prior to being on jeopardy ...

...We were not prepared to let Taff Merthyr go because Taff Merthyr was history then, was a pedestal as far as the South Wales coalfield was concerned from the time it opened in 1926. They weren't prepared to accept or to let it go.<sup>135</sup>

Situated at the bottom of the isolated Taff-Bargoed valley, Taff Merthyr was a vital source of employment for the village of Bedlinog which had been devastated by the closure of two other collieries in the valley in 1924. The miners' defeat in the 1926 lock-out meant that the SWMF was refused a foothold in the colliery. For the next twelve years, Taff Merthyr was the bastion of company unionism within the coalfield; the colliery became synonymous with the protracted and bitter campaign to re-establish the authority of the SWMF. Local miners who remained loyal to the SWMF throughout this period experienced significant victimisation with many prevented from gaining employment at the colliery.<sup>136</sup> As Williams describes, much was achieved at the colliery in the following decades. Taff Merthyr's period of high production rates, the successful integration of power loading machinery, and the highly favourable wages negotiated by the lodge on behalf of the men, all added to the sense of pride that the miners could take in both the colliery and their work. In this context, the shock placement of the colliery on the jeopardy list was interpreted by the miners as a failure to live up to the legacy of the Taff Merthyr colliery and previous generations of men who had worked there. Their determination to reverse the fortunes of the colliery stemmed from more than just a desire to protect their own livelihoods. Collective action

---

<sup>135</sup> SWML, AUD/66, Elwyn Gwyn Williams.

<sup>136</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. 278-286 and pp. 379-389.

was made possible by a shared history of what it meant to be a Taff Merthyr miner, and it was this perception of their masculinity and working identity that the miners sought to preserve by defending the pit. Their identity was informed not merely by the labour they performed, but the history and conditions of the specific pit in which they worked.

Elsewhere, the desire for the union to adopt a more combative stance was given a semi-organised outlet in South Wales in the form of an 'unofficial movement'. This unofficial movement had its origins in the Wern Tarw incident in 1951. In this year, the NCB announced their plan to tackle a manpower shortage issue at Llanharan Colliery by transferring men over from Wern Tarw.<sup>137</sup> For the miners at Wern Tarw, this was interpreted as a first step towards the closure of their colliery.<sup>138</sup> In response, an unofficial strike was called by lodge officials in the Dulais Valley. The strike lasted three weeks with some 15,000 men taking part, predominantly from the Dulais and Garw valleys.<sup>139</sup> Despite their efforts, the transfer of men went ahead after a South Wales Area conference decided not to support the strike. This event set the tone for Area policy on pit closures for much of the next two decades. Though the unofficial movement was formally banned by Area conference in 1952, the network's influence grew again in the 1960s as a consequence of growing discontent amongst the rank-and-file over official union policy regarding pit closures.<sup>140</sup> Don Hayward and Emlyn Jenkins – at the time of

---

<sup>137</sup> The events surrounding the partial closure of Wern Tarw are discussed in: Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. 442-444; and also, by Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>138</sup> The irony, as Francis and Smith have indicated (*The Fed*, p. 442), is that Wern Tarw would 'outlive' Llanharan. Llanharan closed in 1962. Wern Tarw in 1964. See also: SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Colliery Closures'.

<sup>139</sup> SWML, AUD/381, Don Hayward and Emlyn Jenkins.

<sup>140</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, pp. 73-77.

the strikes, Chairman of Coedely Lodge and Lodge Official at Lady Windsor Lodge respectively – reflected in their joint interview on the decision of the South Wales Area executive concerning Wern Tarw. Both agreed that ‘if we’d had the support of the executive in those days there’d have been far more collieries open in South Wales than there is today’, and ‘if we’d won the vote in conference, we’d have won the day’.<sup>141</sup> For Hayward and Jenkins, the union’s response to the Wern Tarw issue was, in reflection, lamentable. It did not, however, cause them moral injury in the way that union policy did for Howells. They worked collectively both to defend the interests of the miners they represented and to attempt to shape the South Wales Area’s policy to their needs. By doing so, their perceptions of their claim to acceptable masculinity were maintained.

As stated earlier, there is a notable gap in the oral history collection where we might expect to find interviews with miners who approved of or, at the very least, accepted the union’s policy of inaction over pit closures. To find an exception to this rule, we must turn instead to Paynter’s published autobiography.<sup>142</sup> His rationale for opposing more militant action was quoted earlier in this chapter: he feared that a strike could prompt further closures for which the membership might hold the union responsible.<sup>143</sup> His account has the air of a practised response, one which could possibly be a result of the ability to edit the draft before publication in a way not possible in oral testimony, or which could also stem from his experience of justifying the policy positions he took to the NUM membership. For much of the duration of the mass pit closure programmes, Paynter was General Secretary of

---

<sup>141</sup> SWML, AUD/381, Don Hayward and Emlyn Jenkins.

<sup>142</sup> Paynter, *My Generation*.

<sup>143</sup> Paynter, *My Generation*, p. 142.

the NUM (1959-1968). This position of national union leadership, achieved after years as an activist and leader in the South Wales coalfield, naturally meant that he was more removed from the experiences of the membership than the local leaders whose accounts are explored in this chapter. His lack of support for more militant forms of collective action in this period (e.g. strikes) is evidence of his shifted priorities; he now perceived the maintenance of unity in the national union as a greater priority than adopting a militant defence of miners' livelihoods within the South Wales coalfield.

Much of the work on silences in oral history owes a debt of gratitude to Luisa Passerini. Her work on the memories of the Italian working class in Turin during the Fascist era has emphasised the need for historians to ensure that silences and gaps in oral testimony are subject to analysis.<sup>144</sup> Passerini found that there was a widespread desire not to remember the events that had taken place during the Fascist era in Italy, and consequently, the testimonies she collected featured chronological jumps where the interviewee skipped over these years almost entirely.<sup>145</sup> Difficulties in articulating a life story can occur as a result of numerous situations, including when public discourse stands in contradiction with lived experience.<sup>146</sup> Many of the miners' testimonies held in the SWCC were collected as part of coalfield oral history projects in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The stories it was possible to tell about the pit closures in the 1950s and 1960s will have been affected by the dominant cultural narrative concerning collective action at the time of the interview. By this point, the growing demands

---

<sup>144</sup> Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*.

<sup>145</sup> Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, pp. 67-69.

<sup>146</sup> Summerfield, *Histories of Self*, p. 127.

for increased union militancy throughout the 1960s had borne fruit; the NUM fought, and won, two national strikes (in 1972 and 1974) – the first national disputes since their defeat in 1926. Those who were in favour of, or who had advocated for the union’s policy of inaction would now need to articulate this stance against the popular feeling in the coalfield. Given that the researchers adopted a deliberate policy of allowing the interviewee to ‘talk unrestricted’ – there were, perhaps, simply easier, more comfortable stories for these miners to tell.<sup>147</sup>

Passerini also found that what initially appeared to be a silence or gap in an oral testimony was not always as it first appeared. The people she interviewed would sometimes talk about aspects of life during the Fascist era which were not obviously linked to fascism – family life or everyday hardships being key examples.<sup>148</sup> In this way it was possible to reveal aspects of life that had initially appeared to have been completely lost from the historical record. Passerini argued that historians had been too focused on the formal political sphere and questions relating to collusion or resistance, and as a result had missed subtle clues as to the everyday experiences of life under the regime.<sup>149</sup> This chapter has sought to explore responses to the union policy of inaction on pit closures. In doing so, it has been drawn both to the loud voices of opposition and the comparative silence of those who approved and advocated for this policy. Chapter Four pays more attention to those who perhaps made up the majority of the coalfield – the men who quietly accepted or were mostly ambivalent towards union policy. They may not have felt compelled to voice their response to union policy, but their

---

<sup>147</sup> *The South Wales Coalfield History Project, Final Report*, p. 137.

<sup>148</sup> Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, p. 68.

<sup>149</sup> Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, pp. 6-7 and 67-70.

recollections of how they prepared for the potential closures of their pit and how they acted when closure occurred are equally revealing.

In this chapter I have explored miners' recollections of nationalisation and the NUM's policy of inaction adopted in response to pit closures in the era of public ownership. I have demonstrated that the prior historiographical tendency towards institutional narratives has masked the significance that the miners themselves placed on the arrival of the public industry. Reactions to nationalisation were differentiated by lifecycle stage; those old enough to directly recall life in the coalfield during the interwar years placed much emphasis on the expectation that nationalisation would provide job security. These accounts have revealed the profound pressure that miners had experienced in terms of their ability to fulfil the breadwinner/provider role and the relief they felt when this pressure appeared to have been removed. Recollections of the return of job insecurity were varied. Miners realised that their livelihoods were under threat at different times, though the NCB's pit closure programme announced in 1959 stood out as a turning point for many. Some perceived pit closures to mean the return of job insecurity after a period of relative stability. Others questioned whether the stability provided by nationalisation had always been an illusion.

The union's policy of inaction over pit closures was deeply disconcerting for a vocal minority of the coalfield. In a community where survival had, for multiple generations, been predicated on a collectivist principle, and where a commitment to collectivism was embedded through childhood experiences and the requirements of working life underground, some found union inaction to be anathema to the requirements of acceptable masculinity. The case of Berwyn

Howells demonstrates that union policy had the capacity to cause moral injury for those who occupied formal positions within the union hierarchy. The depth of this injury became readily apparent as Howells continued to grapple with the consequences at the time of his interview in 1980. For others who disapproved of the NUM's policy of inaction, it was possible to negotiate the demands of acceptable masculinity and their responsibilities to the men they represented without recourse to official channels of collective action. Indeed, union policy forced local union leaders to find new – unofficial – collective means of defending their shared interests.

Finally, this chapter addresses the apparent silences and gaps in the oral history collection. I proffer an explanation for these gaps which takes account of the changing discourse of the coalfield and the dual chronology of oral testimonies. In the next chapter, this thesis builds on these discussions by exploring the decisions miners made when faced with the closure of their pit. Here the tendencies towards individualism in the coalfield that existed during this period reveal themselves, forcing miners to act independently in defence of their masculine status as miners and wage-earners.

## Chapter 4

### Manpower Movement During the Era of Mass Pit Closures

Ronald Clayton Rowlands, like most boys who grew up in the South Wales coalfield in the 1920s, started his working life underground. He joined the workforce at Hafodyrynys Colliery in 1935 where he worked alongside men from the nearby village of the same name and the local towns of Abertillery and Pontypool. Rowlands might have spent much of his working life in the colliery had it not been for the advent of the Second World War. In 1939 he left the coal industry for the army, serving until he was demobilised in 1946. Interviewed in 1981 as part of the Second Coalfield Project, Rowlands recalled that his years spent in the army working above ground made him reluctant to return to the damp and the dark – preferring the fresh air, he returned to work at Hafodyrynys as a surface worker just before the industry was nationalised.<sup>1</sup> Over the next two decades, Rowlands would leave the industry on two further occasions. First in 1954 when he worked briefly at the Royal Ordnance Factory near Usk. The reasons for this move are not revealed in Rowland's testimony, though he does state that leaving the colliery was a mistake. He missed the camaraderie of his colleagues in the coal industry and felt his place was back in the mines. After approximately a year, he took a job at Navigation Colliery in Crumlin where he found the environment to be an improvement of Hafodyrynys. At Navigation, the camaraderie amongst the workforce was even

---

<sup>1</sup> SWML, AUD/117, Ronald Clayton Rowlands, interviewed by Kim Howells, 4 June 1981.

greater; it was a close-knit, family pit staffed almost entirely by men from Pontypool – fathers, sons, and brothers worked alongside each other. By the 1960s, the pit's future was uncertain. In anticipation of its future closure, Rowlands sought work elsewhere with the aim of 'bettering himself' whilst he was still relatively young.<sup>2</sup> His options, however, were limited by his lack of formal qualifications. In 1965, two years before Navigation closed, Rowlands found a job in a nearby factory that manufactured pens.<sup>3</sup> This was the third time Rowlands left the coal industry, and much like his prior experience at the munitions factory, he found the work 'wasn't [his] cup of tea'.<sup>4</sup> He looked to return to the mines at the earliest possible opportunity. It was two years later that he found an unspecified job at the colliery at Six Bells – this was just six miles from where he first began working underground at Hafodyrynys in 1935, and it was here that he was still working at the time of his interview in 1981.

Rowland's testimony speaks to a common trend in the lives of miners in 1950s and 1960s South Wales; the shrinking availability of minework meant that men could no longer expect to spend the entirety of their working lives in the coal industry. Whilst job security was an issue affecting miners across Britain's coalfields, those working in regions which had a high concentration of older and less efficient collieries – such as South Wales – were most affected. A fifth of the mines that were closed in Britain between 1947 and 1970 were located in the

---

<sup>2</sup> SWML, AUD/117, Ronald Clayton Rowlands.

<sup>3</sup> For colliery closure dates see: SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Colliery Closures'.

<sup>4</sup> SWML, AUD/117, Ronald Clayton Rowlands.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

South Wales coalfield.<sup>5</sup> Over the same period, the number of men employed in the region's mines fell by sixty-five percent to just 38,000.<sup>6</sup> Whilst industrial decline in earlier decades had produced mass unemployment and poverty, under public ownership the reduction and redistribution of the workforce could feasibly be planned for. Whilst redundancies could not be entirely avoided, the worst effects of pit closures were mitigated through a combination of NCB practice and government policy. NCB practice was to offer miners from closing collieries transfer to other collieries wherever possible. From the 1960s, this practice coincided with the NCB's broader strategy for the South Wales coalfield. Manpower and resources were to be concentrated in a handful of newly developed, large-scale 'super pits', and a small number of older, but extensively re-developed collieries.<sup>7</sup> Successive governments were proactive (to greater or lesser extents) in encouraging the establishment of alternative industries with the intention of diversifying employment opportunities within the region. By the mid-1960s, a range of new industries, including car, bicycle, and pen manufacturers, operated alongside the region's munitions factories (opened in the 1930s) and the traditional heavy industries of coal and steel.<sup>8</sup> It was in this period – when the coal industry was shrinking but the regional economy was experiencing a period of

---

<sup>5</sup> The number of mines which closed across Britain in this period has been calculated based on the decrease in NCB owned mines – it does not factor in the small number of mines which were, for example, bought out by small private concerns (such as miners' co-operatives). British statistics taken from: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Historical Coal Data*. For South Wales closures, see: SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Colliery Closures'.

<sup>6</sup> For British manpower statistics, see: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Historical Coal Data*. For South Wales statistics, see: SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board South Wales Area, 'General Statistics (South Wales Coalfield)', [1976].

<sup>7</sup> Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, pp. 58-60.

<sup>8</sup> Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 61.

diversification – that most miners first had occasion to consider employment outside of the coal industry.

This chapter considers how miners renegotiated their masculinity in response to pit closures, job insecurity, and the changing economic structure of the coalfield. As already established, in South Wales during the 1950s and 1960s, unemployment was only one of several possible outcomes that could follow a pit closure. The arrival of new industries in the coalfield and the possibility of transferring to other pits provided miners with a variety of ways to respond to pit closures and long-term job insecurity. In thinking about the greater degree of agency miners had over their occupational decision making in this period, this chapter revisits the theme of imagined futures that has emerged at various points throughout this thesis. By imagined futures, I mean the futures miners were able to imagine for themselves within the constraints of personal circumstance and experience. Personal circumstance, of course, includes both geography and the lifecycle. This theme is not one that has frequently caught the attention of historians in the field of gender history. Little has been done to elucidate how imagined futures interact with gender identities. The work of Denise Riley has informed my thinking on this topic.<sup>9</sup> Riley, in her study of working women at the end of the Second World War, critiqued the interpretation of a questionnaire filled out by women which indicated that many imagined they would return to a domestic future after the war.<sup>10</sup> This data, Riley suggested should not be taken as proof of

---

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Professor Corinna Peniston-Bird for a conversation we had on the subject of imagined futures and for pointing me in the direction of Denise Riley's scholarship.

<sup>10</sup> Denise Riley, 'The Free Mothers': Pronatalism and Working Women in Industry at the End of the Last War in Britain', *History Workshop*, 11 (1981), pp. 58-118.

women's disinterest in paid work, but rather as evidence of what women had been led to expect of their future once the war was over.<sup>11</sup> What, then, were the futures miners could imagine for themselves as the coal industry shrank? How did these futures differ from those that they had imagined as children, and how might young people growing up in the coalfield in the 1950s and 1960s imagine their future? These are the questions on which I will reflect in this chapter. In doing so, I consider how the futures miners imagined for themselves played a role in determining how they renegotiated their perceptions of their own masculinity in response to pit closures and the diversification of the regional economy.

The occupational decisions miners made in response to the changing economic circumstances of the coalfield in the 1950s and 1960s – namely, whether to move within, or leave the industry – have been the subject of some scholarly exploration by both historians and sociologists. Collectively, this literature has identified broad trends in manpower movement from which it is possible to glean that miners' experiences of pit closures and job insecurity were mediated both by their lifecycle stage and by what might broadly be termed geography. Miners' masculinities and working identities, however, have been missing from this discussion. This chapter addresses this gap in the scholarship. Curtis identifies, as indeed do Francis and Smith, that it was younger miners with transferable craft skills who were most likely to leave the region's collieries in favour of 'lucrative, secure employment' in other industries.<sup>12</sup> Older miners,

---

<sup>11</sup> Riley, "The Free Mothers", *History Workshop*, (p. 62).

<sup>12</sup> Quote from: Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 453. See also, Curtis: *South Wales Miners*, p. 61; John Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change: A Study of a South Wales Mining Valley*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1975), p. 9.

meanwhile, were those most likely to stay in the industry.<sup>13</sup> Some of these older miners did so in the hope that their colliery would remain open long enough for them to reach retirement age and thus avoid the need to transfer to a new colliery or find alternative employment.<sup>14</sup> It was also older and disabled miners who were most likely to experience redundancy following a pit closure and have the greatest difficulty obtaining employment elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> The role played by the lifecycle in shaping miners' occupational decision making appears to have been consistent across Britain's coalfields. In her study of miners' attitudes and responses to pit closures in the Somerset coalfield between 1947 and 1973, Penny Bonsall found that younger miners tended to occupy craft positions, but typically only remained in the industry long enough to qualify in a trade that would allow them to find skilled work in other industries.<sup>16</sup> She also argued that for older, disabled miners, the coal industry operated as a 'sheltered workshop'; these miners were likely to remain in the industry hoping that their colliery could stay open until the end of their working lives.<sup>17</sup>

While certain trends can be tracked across multiple British coalfields, the specifics of regional or local circumstance could, and frequently did, affect miners' experiences of pit closures and their employment trajectory. The experience of job insecurity, for example, was dependent to a large degree on the local availability of alternative employment. John Sewel's study of social change in

---

<sup>13</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 455.

<sup>14</sup> Penny Bonsall, 'The Somerset Coalfield, 1947-1973: Attitudes and Responses to Pit Closures in the Post-Nationalisation Era', *Southern History Society*, 11 (1989), pp. 114-130 (p. 124).

<sup>15</sup> Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change*, p. 7 and p. 38. See also: Bonsall, 'The Somerset Coalfield', p. 122 and p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> Bonsall, 'The Somerset Coalfield', p. 124.

<sup>17</sup> Bonsall, 'The Somerset Coalfield', p. 124.

the Dulais Valley, which explores the consequences of the closure of Cefn Coed Colliery in April 1968, is particularly revealing of the ways in which local circumstances could influence the decisions miners made about their future employment.<sup>18</sup> Before its closure, Cefn Coed was one of only three surviving collieries in the Dulais Valley. The closure of the valley's other collieries had taken place in a remarkably short period of time – five had shut since 1962.<sup>19</sup> When Cefn Coed closed, the men were offered transfers to the two remaining collieries in the valley: Blaenant and Treforgan. Nearly all of the men accepted the transfer offer. This decision, Sewel argues, guaranteed miners 'the minimum degree of immediate social and economic disruption'.<sup>20</sup> In the Dulais Valley, opportunities in other industries remained stubbornly low. If the Cefn Coed miners wished to leave the coal industry in favour of alternative work, they would also need to leave the valley, disrupting their ties to the community in which they lived, worked, and socialised.<sup>21</sup> By comparison, the Blaenant and Treforgan collieries were very conveniently located. The Blaenant drift was accessed from the same site as Cefn Coed, whilst Treforgan was located less than two miles away. Sewel also notes that the reluctance of most of the Cefn Coed miners (those without craft skills) to leave the valley was underscored by the expectation that they would only find low-skilled or semi-skilled work which would attract a lower wage than could be earned in coal mining.<sup>22</sup> The realities of the region's industrial geography, alongside miners' desires to maintain their economic status and connections to their local

---

<sup>18</sup> Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change*.

<sup>19</sup> Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change*, p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change*, p. 12 and pp. 48-52.

<sup>22</sup> Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change*, p. 9 and p. 39.

community, exerted a powerful influence on the Cefn Coed miners' decisions about their employment.

For historians of the coalfield, a focus on these broad manpower trends has arguably suited a traditional labour history model where interest in the decisions miners made stemmed largely from a desire to explain the decline of the industry and the shift of manpower away from the region's collieries.<sup>23</sup> This focus, however, has masked the experiences of individual miners, particularly those whose employment trajectory does not map neatly on to these broad trends. The testimonies explored in this chapter reveal a greater variety of experience than has previously been accounted for. Miners frequently reflected in their testimonies on their decisions to stay, move within, or leave the coal industry. Their attitudes towards coal mining and the prospect of employment in other industries reveal which aspects of their masculinity and working identity they sought to preserve, and which they were willing to renegotiate or let go of, when responding to pit closures and job insecurity. A focus on miners' masculinities and working identities therefore allows us to make sense of this variation and, in doing so, this chapter complicates our understanding of the role that the lifecycle and geography played in mediating miners' occupational decisions.

This chapter will provide an overview of the policies implemented by successive governments which served to reshape the economic landscape of South Wales. This contextualises the discussion which follows in which the rationales that underpinned miners' decisions to stay within, leave, or return to the

---

<sup>23</sup> This is particularly the case for Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, pp. 47-89.

coal industry are explored. Within this discussion, several key observations are made. The first concerns how the diversification of the regional economy led to a breakdown of the traditional mining lifecycle as miners of all ages reconsidered their positions within the coal industry. The second serves to complicate our understanding of the role that geography played in mediating miners' occupational decisions by highlighting the highly localised nature of miners' identities, and the challenges miners faced in translating these identities from one colliery to another. The third analysis concerns a broader cultural shift in how masculinity was understood and performed in South Wales during the 1950s and 1960s. More specifically, this chapter identifies that miners were increasingly renegotiating their perceptions of masculinity away from an occupation-specific understanding and towards a related, but broader, society-wide model of masculinity predicated on the breadwinner role. This chapter contributes to the overall argument of this thesis by demonstrating that miners' capacity to renegotiate aspects of their masculinity and working identity was determined in large part by the economic forces which shaped their working lives.

The final section of this chapter follows miners' occupational decision making to its logical conclusion by exploring, where possible, miners' experiences of adjusting to work within the manufacturing sector. Through the consideration of those testimonies which touch on miners' experiences of other industries, this chapter sheds light on the challenges of renegotiating established identities in new settings as well as exploring the circumstances which led some miners to ultimately return to the coal industry.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Attempts by government to diversify the South Wales economy during the 1950s and 1960s followed a precedent first set during the interwar years. In the 1920s and 1930s, successive governments – fearful of potential social unrest – made various attempts to improve the labour market and provide support for those experiencing unemployment. In recognition of the uneven impacts of the Depression, South Wales, along with three other coal mining regions were granted ‘Special Area’ status under legislation introduced in 1934.<sup>24</sup> With this designation came additional funding that was intended to encourage non-coal mining industries to establish themselves in these depressed areas. Most notably, this led to the development of the Treforest Industrial Estate approximately eight miles north of Cardiff at the bottom of the Taff Valley. The impact of this estate on overall unemployment figures in the region was initially small and local MPs were critical of the National Government for boasting of its efforts to provide work for 3,000 people when 161,000 remained unemployed.<sup>25</sup> As discussed above, further government attempts to tackle mass unemployment in the 1930s coincided with the rearmament campaign and created significantly more job opportunities than those at the Treforest Estate. As Mak identified, by 1942 the munitions factories in Glascoed, Hirwuan, and Bridgend employed some 60,000 people, creating a notable shift in employment patterns for the surrounding areas.<sup>26</sup> It is important to note, however, that across the coalfield as a whole the availability of employment outside of the coal industry remained low during the interwar years. Many

---

<sup>24</sup> Stephanie Ward, *Unemployment and the State in Britain: The Means Test and Protest in 1930s South Wales and North East England*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 50-51. The other areas were Northeast England, West Scotland and West Cumberland.

<sup>25</sup> HC Deb 29 July 1936 vol 315 cc1660-1661.

<sup>26</sup> Mak, ‘Conspicuous Consumption’, in *Lessons of War*, ed. By Peniston-Bird & Vickers, p. 58.

communities, particularly those located at the north end of the valleys, remained heavily reliant on mining.

In the post-war years, employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector expanded in South Wales as successive governments, to a greater or (much) lesser extent, committed to regional policies which sought to ensure low levels of unemployment across Britain. In 1945, the Special Areas legislation from the interwar period was replaced by the Distribution of Industry Act which gave wider powers to the government to not only fund the building of new factories, but to also determine where privately financed factories could be located.<sup>27</sup> By 1950, 264 installations had been opened in Wales under this scheme.<sup>28</sup> Throughout the next decade, however, the pace of diversification stagnated as successive Conservative governments maintained only a nominal commitment to these policies. As Leon Gooberman has identified, expenditure on these regional policies dropped by as much as eighty percent in this period.<sup>29</sup> Following the announcement of the first wave of pit closures in 1958, the government downplayed the need for regional intervention policies, preferring instead for the Coal Board to manage these issues internally. In the short term, this approach appeared to be justified as most men could be accommodated within other nearby collieries when their own colliery closed. Speaking in the House of Commons in 1962, the Minister of Power, Richard Wood, congratulated the Coal Board on what he described as 'one of its greatest successes': the run-down of the industry

---

<sup>27</sup> *Distribution of Industry Act, 1945* (8 & 9 Geo. 6) (London: HMSO).

<sup>28</sup> Labour Party Research Department, *Handbook: Facts and Figures for Socialists 1951* (London: The Labour Party, 1950), p. 343.

<sup>29</sup> Leon Gooberman, *From Depression to Devolution: Economy and Government in Wales, 1934-2006* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), p. 52.

undertaken with 'negligible' direct unemployment owing to the Board's pit transfer policy.<sup>30</sup>

As pit closures continued apace, it became increasingly difficult for the NCB to find appropriate transfers for miners at nearby collieries. Successive waves of closures *did* lead to an increase in unemployment across the coalfield. In Chapter Three we saw how, for some miners, the perception of job security within the mining industry depended on the industry being large enough to feasibly absorb the men whose collieries were closing. Once this security was lost, the need for employment opportunities outside of the coal industry grew. Whilst the election of the Labour government in 1964 did not – as the miners hoped – reverse the fortunes of the coal industry, the new administration did re-instigate a more proactive approach to managing regional employment levels. This approach fit within Labour's broader policy initiatives concerning the modernisation of the British economy. In the year before the election, Harold Wilson, delivered his 'white heat of technology' speech at the Labour Party Conference in Scarborough in which he laid out the party's plans for a 'scientific revolution of British industry'. This revolution was to be brought about, he stated, by means of a planned economy.<sup>31</sup> Britain's declining industrial areas were placed at the heart of this plan, reimagined as areas ready for revitalisation with new, modern industries brought in to provide employment.<sup>32</sup> Once in office, Development Areas, which had been watered down under previous Conservative governments, were reintroduced, and

---

<sup>30</sup> HC Deb 20 November 1962 vol 667 cc1122-1123.

<sup>31</sup> *Report of the Sixty-Second Annual Conference of The Labour Party, Scarborough, 1963* (London: The Labour Party, 1963), pp. 133-140.

<sup>32</sup> *Annual Conference of The Labour Party, 1963*, p. 138.

regional spending increased. The government remained particularly alert to increases in unemployment caused by pit closures and introduced additional financial incentives to further encourage factory building as a result.<sup>33</sup> When Wilson was interviewed in 1980 for the Second Coalfield Project, he reflected positively on the work his Labour government had undertaken to minimise the social consequences of pit closures. He recalled feeling ‘very confident’ that during his premiership the government had done ‘a great deal’ for South Wales: ‘...we really did sort of create more work there than had ever been done before’.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the interventions of successive governments since the mid-1930s had worked to restructure the economic landscape of South Wales. By 1970, the coal industry, employing just 38,000 men, no longer dominated the South Wales economy.<sup>35</sup> Across Wales as a whole, manufacturing jobs outnumbered jobs in the coal industry three to one.<sup>36</sup>

Following the election of the Labour government in 1964, local politicians found themselves navigating the tension between supporting the government’s economic policies and assuaging the fears of their constituents. Some attempted to present the diversification of the regional economy not just as a solution to the social problems caused by pit closures, but as a means by which the men of the coalfield could improve the conditions of their working lives. Brian Elliot, the lodge secretary at Penallta Colliery, remembered multiple meetings with Ness Edwards – an ex-miner who served as Labour MP for Caerphilly from 1939 until his death in

---

<sup>33</sup> Gooberman, *From Depression to Devolution*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>34</sup> SWML, AUD/64, Harold Wilson, interviewed by Kim Howells, 1980.

<sup>35</sup> SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board South Wales Area, ‘General Statistics’.

<sup>36</sup> Gooberman, *From Depression to Devolution*, p. 55.

1968. On the occasion of one meeting, he recalled miners in the audience who questioned where they would work if collieries were to continue to close across the coalfield. Edwards responded by pointing to various areas on a map where new factories could be located. 'It was the argument put forward', Elliot stated about this discussion: 'why work underground when it's unnecessary and you could be working in a nice factory?'<sup>37</sup> Here, Elliot manages to articulate the question that, for all intents and purposes, the changing economic circumstances of the coalfield left all miners grappling with. As we shall see throughout this chapter, many miners were persuaded by this line of thinking; the manufacturing sector offered the possibility of continued employment, safer and healthier working conditions, and good pay. Many others, however, felt threatened by the prospect of losing access to the industry which had been foundational to their perceptions of their own identity.

For Elliot, the prospect of a future without mining was a disconcerting one. When Edwards described minework as 'unnecessary', he was presumably intending to emphasise the new opportunities miners had outside of the coal industry. Elliot, however, appears to have understood this comment as a statement about the declining importance of mineworkers within the national economy. This was underscored when Edwards described Britain's future energy consumption in a way that excluded the need for coal:

... Ness Edwards [said] that the, they are finding fields of oil that they never thought existed and therefore this argument that oil will run out is not true. And when it runs out they'll have atomic

---

<sup>37</sup> SWML, AUD/123, Brian Elliot, interviewed by Kim Howells, 7 May 1981.

energy, with little atomic reactor in your living room...<sup>38</sup>

The imagined future that Edwards presented was not merely one in which the industrial landscape of the nation would change, but one in which the domestic sphere, and miners' position within it – images of which are conjured with reference to the living room – would also be affected. The warmth and comfort associated with a traditional coal fire stood to be replaced in miners' homes by a new, cold, and impersonal heat source – one which miners would have no hand in producing. Through his recollections of this meeting, Elliot sheds light on how the changing economic structure of the coalfield, and broader trends in the energy sector, could challenge miners' perceptions of their working identity and their status within broader society, and also disrupt the traditional relationship miners had with home and family. Quite unintentionally, Edwards had conjured images of a future that struck directly at the heart of Elliot's sense of self.

In Elliot's case, the threat posed by pit closures would remain unrealised. The colliery he worked in – Penallta – survived the successive rounds of pit closures in the 1950s and 1960s and was still in operation at the time of his interview in 1981.<sup>39</sup> Unsurprisingly, given his reaction to the future imagined by Ness Edwards, Elliot never gave serious consideration to leaving the industry of his own volition. When asked why he chose to stay in the mines, Elliot responded:

Well, I never really seriously thought about doing anything else.  
Emm ... I bought a car to learn to drive because I thought if the

---

<sup>38</sup> SWML, AUD/123, Brian Elliot.

<sup>39</sup> Penallta eventually closed in November 1991. An article about the closure appeared in the *South Wales Echo* and Ron Stoate, who was by then the Penallta Colliery Lodge Secretary, was quoted voicing the same fears that Elliot recalled feeling in the 1960s: 'They don't know anything else, it's a way of life. It's frightening leaving that behind...'. See: 'Ending on a Cheerful Note: Miners Put on a Brave Face as Colliery Closes', *South Wales Echo*, 1 November 1991, p. 12.

pits closed then I'd go somewhere else to look for a job and be mobile. But I never really thought, when I was on piecework I generally earned reasonable good money, I was pretty fit, so therefore I never looked to work anywhere else. I'd learned to do mining, I could earn money at mining and I never was ambitious to go anywhere else.<sup>40</sup>

His response followed a brief moment of consideration in which he chuckled quietly. The source of Elliot's amusement appears to lie in the incongruity between the interviewer's question – which assumes Elliot made an active decision to stay – and his own experience – which he characterised as a passive continuation of previous behaviour. Whilst he took measures to protect himself from potential unemployment that could have arisen if Penallta had been targeted for closure (buying a car to ensure his mobility), Elliot was otherwise uninterested in the possibility of leaving the coal industry. Elliot's response indicates that his lack of interest stemmed from the stability of his relationship with mining labour – he knew the job and could earn good money, and he remained in good health and therefore physically capable of the work. Indeed, his reflections here suggest that there was little in his day-to-day life within the colliery that served to disrupt or challenge his perceptions of his own masculinity and working identity. The traditional relationship between pay, skill, physical strength, status and masculinity remained intact. Intriguingly, Elliot also implies that a decision to leave the industry in these circumstances would have been 'ambitious'. In doing so, he underscores his sense of belonging within the industry and the fulfilment he experienced through his work.

---

<sup>40</sup> SWML, AUD/123, Brian Elliot.

This picture is somewhat complicated by events that Elliot recalled elsewhere in his testimony. Specifically, he recalled that Penallta miners experienced a rapid and significant drop in pay in the late 1950s which led to the ‘sudden drastic reduction’ of the workforce:

...the knife was put in [miners’] allowances. Over a matter of weeks, they’d be halved, and then they’d be halved further, and then you was right down on low money. This caused a lot of unrest and a lot of men finished in the industry then.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the severity of this pay cut, it appears to have had little impact on Elliot’s commitment to remaining in the coal industry. Whilst he never directly explained why he was willing to overlook this situation, his reflection that he ‘generally earned reasonable good money’ at Penallta suggests a tendency to view such circumstances within the broader context of his experiences at work as a whole. This long-term perspective, which underpinned his understanding of his masculinity and working identity, appears to have provided him with a degree of resilience against fluctuations in his day-to-day circumstances. Elliot’s recollections indicate, however, that many of his colleagues were far less willing to take the long view of this situation. What does their decision to leave Penallta over this issue suggest about their relationship with the coal industry and their perceptions of their own working identity?

A surface-level reading of Elliot’s account would suggest a purely financial motivation for the departure of the Penallta miners. After all, why stay in the coal industry if you could earn more in a factory? I would argue, however, that the

---

<sup>41</sup> SWML, AUD/123, Brian Elliot.

unrest amongst the workforce had as much to do with the significance men attached to the pay packet – namely, the status it conferred – as its contents. As Mak found in her study of the Nantyglo and Blaina mining communities during the Second World War, a decrease in miners' wages (whether in absolute terms, or in relation to the income of others in the community) serves to disrupt the traditional relationship between masculinity, status, pay, and skill.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, cutting miners' allowances could be particularly disruptive because allowances were designed to compensate miners for additional work outside of their usual remit or for work undertaken in particularly challenging or unpleasant circumstances (working in the wet, for example).<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Elliot recalled that the Penallta workforce had accepted increases in these allowances over the years rather than pushing for the basic rate of pay to be improved. There is the sense here that many of the men felt betrayed by the NCB's decision to unilaterally cut allowances that had previously been negotiated between the workforce and management. This feeling is most clearly articulated by Elliot when he described the pay cut in terms of a 'knife' in their allowances. The injury caused was not just to the wage packet, but to miners' relationship with the industry and their perceptions of their status within the community. For these miners, the decision to leave the industry was spurred on by the realisation that the benefits they expected to be conferred upon them for the performance of unpleasant and difficult work had been removed. In

---

<sup>42</sup> Mak, 'Conspicuous Consumption', in *Lessons of War*, ed. by Peniston-Bird & Vickers, p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> This point echoes that made by Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques, and Clifford Slaughter in *Coal is Our Life*. They posit that any attempt to change the existing price-list would be met with distrust and the assumption that management were attempting to disregard standards which had been fought for, and secured, by miners over many years: Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques, and Clifford Slaughter, *Coal is Our Life*, 2nd edn (London: Tavistock Publications, 1969), pp. 64-68.

this sense, their departure was a means of protesting against their treatment and demonstrating their perceived value as both men and workers.

Elsewhere in the coalfield, reductions in miners' wages not only undermined the status attached to the performance of minework but also exacerbated the already difficult relationship some miners had with their place of work. Edward Thomas, the lodge secretary at Glyncastle Colliery, recalled long-standing frustrations amongst the workforce which began with the completion of the colliery's pit head baths in 1952. Glyncastle was a colliery with two surface sites. The pit head baths were situated at the lower of these two sites requiring men to take a colliery bus up a purpose-made road in order to access the mine from the upper site. This, Thomas recalled, added at least half an hour to the length of the shift, though this time was unpaid. In winter, the travel time increased as buses could not complete the journey in icy conditions. This issue rumbled on for a number of years until the situation came to a head in 1965. Many miners left the industry in the early months of this year during what Thomas remembered as a particularly harsh winter where many miners lost work because weather conditions made accessing the mine almost impossible. These conditions were coupled with an overtime ban which proved particularly frustrating for the colliery's day wage workers who typically used overtime to supplement their standard wage packet. 'All of a sudden', Thomas recalled, the miners could 'earn better wages in the factories ... than what they're paid in Glyncastle'.<sup>44</sup> Collectively, Elliot's and Thomas' testimonies reveal that many miners experienced the combination of

---

<sup>44</sup> SWML, AUD/147, Edward Thomas, interviewed Kim Howells, 21 May 1982.

industrial decline and economic diversification as both threat and opportunity. As miners' perceptions of their own masculinity were being challenged by wage cuts, factory work appeared to offer a means to regain some of what they had lost. In this sense, these miners chose to prioritise financial security over the maintenance of their working identity as coal miners, but did so only after the challenges within the coal industry had disrupted their traditional understanding of the relationship between pay, status, and masculinity.

Mass departures as a result of a deterioration of localised working conditions were part of a broader trend which saw men drawn away from *all* collieries, not just those which had been scheduled for closure. By the 1960s, collieries in South Wales were experiencing significant manpower shortages which encouraged the decline of the industry to '[develop] its own momentum'.<sup>45</sup> From 1964, collieries were scheduled for closure not just because of exhaustion or inefficiency, but because the NCB could not muster sufficient manpower to appropriately staff them.<sup>46</sup> Under these circumstances, the recruitment of new men and boys became a particular point of focus. Job adverts promising secure employment within specific pits or across the industry as a whole appeared in South Wales newspapers throughout the 1960s.<sup>47</sup> One of these advertisements,

---

<sup>45</sup> Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 62.

<sup>46</sup> Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> See for example: National Coal Board, 'He's Not Worrying About Leaving School – His Future is Right Here in Wales', *Port Talbot Guardian*, 14 July 1967, p. 3. Duplicates of this advert appeared in *South Wales Gazette*, 21 July 1967, p. 7. National Coal Board, 'Be a Modern Miner', *Pontypridd Observer*, 3 June 1966, p. 16. Also appeared in *Neath Guardian*, 3 June 1966, p. 17. National Coal Board: South Western Division, 'Men and Boys Wanted in the Collieries of the No.2 (Maesteg) Area', *Glamorgan Advertiser*, 10 June 1960, p. 4 and 17 June 1960, p. 8. National Coal Board, 'The Sky's The Limit!', *Port Talbot Guardian*, 18 September 1969, p. 14. National Coal Board, 'It Takes a Man to be a Modern Miner: Come and Join Them', *South Wales Gazette*, 1 April 1966, p. 6. National Coal Board, 'Man! If you're 15-18 – See Why So Many Like You Are Going into Mining', *Pontypridd Observer*, 17 February 1967, p. 10.

published in June 1966, filled a full page in the *Pontypridd Observer* and promised a range of high-quality training opportunities with ‘life-long security in long-life pits\*’. Whilst the advert’s main text painted a picture of confidence within the industry, the inclusion of the asterisk unconsciously revealed a growing point of concern: that many young men who joined the industry in this period, stayed just long enough to earn a qualification before moving on to other work. Tucked away at the end of the advert, the related footnote reads, ‘\*men who’ll make life-long miners are needed, too’.<sup>48</sup> Concerns about the drift of manpower away from the industry were echoed by the NUM. Indeed, union officials had been sounding alarm bells since the late 1950s. Following his election as President of the South Wales Area of the NUM, Will Whitehead used his first written address in *The Miner* in 1959 to warn that manpower within the industry was already ‘dangerously near the crisis level’. He highlighted the departure of young, highly skilled and craft-trained miners as a particular cause for concern. These men, he stated, were ‘the most important’ to the running of the industry, and the impact of their departure would be impossible to estimate.<sup>49</sup>

Approximately twenty years later, Dai Francis, who served alongside Whitehead as General Secretary (1963-1976), recalled with frustration the problems of retaining this particular group within the coal industry:

...And the younger generation who was coming into the coal mining – if they were coming in, they’d be well trained by the Coal Board and they’d go out in two or three years as trained craftsmen, excellent craftsmen. Because the Coal Board have got a better training scheme than any other industry in Britain.

---

<sup>48</sup> National Coal Board, ‘Be a Modern Miner’, *Pontypridd Observer*, 3 June 1966, p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Will Whitehead, ‘The Presidents’ Industrial Notes: Miners Are Losing Faith in the Industry’, *The Miner*, 7: 4 (1959), pp. 4-5.

And if there was a job going in Fords, or any other outside industry for a craftsman, that manager or that owner of that factory would give preference to a skilled apprentice from the coal mining industry. That was well known.<sup>50</sup>

It is difficult to confirm the full extent to which other industries did 'give preference' to the recruitment of skilled men trained by the NCB. Of more significance, however, is Francis' claim that this was a widely accepted fact amongst the mining workforce. This common knowledge was presumably underpinned by the demand for electricians, mechanics and engineers outside of the coal industry. Vacancy advertisements in local newspapers suggest that other industries – including some located outside of Wales – were alert to the concentration of highly trained men in South Wales who might have been open to the possibility of work outside of the coal industry. In 1965, for example, a laboratory in Berkshire operated by the Atomic Energy Authority used the *Neath Guardian* to advertise various positions for skilled craftsmen which required applicants to have completed a 'recognised electrical and engineering' or 'mechanical engineering apprenticeship'.<sup>51</sup> The same can be said of Ford who had opened a factory in Swansea in 1965 and invested significantly in several phases of expansion during the remainder of the decade. Ford had little difficulty in staffing the Swansea site. In these early years of operation, regular (often front page) coverage of the expansion plans in the local press seemingly negated the need for direct recruitment campaigns.<sup>52</sup> Later

---

<sup>50</sup> SWML, AUD/452, Dai Francis, interviewed by David Egan, c. 1979-1982.

<sup>51</sup> United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, 'Skilled Craftsmen', *Neath Guardian*, 29 January 1965, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> For a sample of reporting on the planned expansions at the Ford factory see: 'Dramatic Expansion Plan for Ford Factory', *Neath Guardian*, 17 June 1966, p. 1; 'Jobs for Extra 100 at Ford Factory', *Neath Guardian*, 13 June 1969, p. 1; 'Jobs for Further 170 at Ford's', *Neath Guardian*, 20 June 1968, p. 2; 'Ford £10 m expansion answer to many local problems', *Neath Guardian*, 26 June 1969, p. 1.

recruitment efforts, however, appear to have been targeted towards exactly this group of young, craft trained miners whose departure from the industry Francis lamented. An advert from April 1974 in the *Neath Guardian* stated, 'if you're fit and have a good work record, preferably with engineering experience go now to: your local Department of Employment'.<sup>53</sup> The willingness of these miners to leave the coal industry following the completion of their training indicates that a shift had occurred amongst younger generations of the workforce. The combination of high-quality training and the availability of alternative employment opportunities enabled the younger men of the coalfield to imagine a greater variety of possible futures for themselves than was possible for those miners who had come before them. Possession of an NCB education meant that progression through the traditional miners' lifecycle was no longer perceived as an inevitability. Minework could be a means to an end, rather than the end itself.

The insufficient number of new starters, noted by Francis above, indicates that many were opting out of coal industry – and therefore the mining lifecycle – altogether. It is worth pausing to reflect on this development for a moment. As we saw in Chapter One, in great number, the autobiographies and testimonies of miners who grew up in the South Wales coalfield in earlier decades attest to the inescapable pull of the collieries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the ubiquitous experiences of hardship combined with the limited availability of alternative employment opportunities in the region meant many felt that entering the mining workforce was inevitable. When the government took action to reduce

---

<sup>53</sup> Ford, 'There's a Job at Ford for You!', *Neath Guardian*, 12 April 1974, p. 12.

the risk of mass unemployment in the coalfield, the resulting diversification of employment opportunities provided many boys with a greater degree of agency that enabled them to make decisions about their working lives which had been unavailable to previous generations. Industrial geographies still acted as a constraint on boys' decision making in this period. As discussed at various points in this chapter, some communities were better served by the manufacturing sector than others. Clifford Davies, who lived in Gorseinon near the Gower Peninsula, recalled leaving school in 1959 and still finding that minework was the only work he could feasibly access.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, for the first time, many boys growing up in the coalfield could feasibly imagine – and strive to secure – a working life that involved them never having to set foot in a colliery at all.

Younger miners were amongst those most inclined to view the changing economic structure of the coalfield opportunistically. By comparison, those at the other end of the mining lifecycle were far less likely to view these changes in this light. As discussed earlier in this chapter, scholarship to date has ascertained that older and disabled miners were amongst the most likely to want to stay in the coal industry and were typically the most vulnerable to unemployment and redundancy. Nevertheless, there were older and disabled miners who bucked this trend. For these men, the decision to leave the industry was part of an individualised process of coming to terms with their declining health and physical capacity. Phil Jones, who worked at Seven Sisters colliery, was one of these miners. He, along with tens of thousands of other men in South Wales, was a pneumoconiosis sufferer. He

---

<sup>54</sup> SWML, AUD/144, Clifford Eric James Davies, interviewed by Kim Howells, 7 May 1980.

was diagnosed in 1949 at the age of thirty-four.<sup>55</sup> At the point of diagnosis, miners were given a percentage that indicated the level of lung damage they had incurred.<sup>56</sup> Miners' testimonies suggest that this percentage was frequently used to indicate to others within the community the level of disablement or suffering they, or another individual, were experiencing. This raises fascinating implications regarding disabled miners' performance of masculinity that merits further study but is beyond the purview of this thesis. This was the percentage Jones referred to when Francis asked him whether he left the industry because of his illness:

... I carried on with ten percent but as soon as they put another twenty percent on me I finished. I took a job in charge of steel in the colliery for a number of years and then I took a job ... in charge of ventilation – checking gas and all – we had machines to check.<sup>57</sup>

His experience of disablement through minework included both traditional and new methods of managing its impact on his working life. Jones' level of impairment in 1949 – ten percent – was considered to be low level, and he chose to manage this situation in line with traditional colliery practice by moving on to light work.<sup>58</sup> These light jobs, often performed on the colliery surface, served to mitigate against the potentially profound consequences of disablement on miners' masculinity and

---

<sup>55</sup> By the 1960s, pneumoconiosis was the leading cause of disablement in the mines with some 20,000 miners diagnosed, the largest portion of whom were in South Wales. See McIvor and Johnston, *Miners' Lung*, pp. 148-149 and pp. 56-57.

<sup>56</sup> McIvor and Johnston, *Miners' Lung*, p. 275.

<sup>57</sup> SWML, AUD/657, Phil Jones, interviewed by Hywel Francis, 3 December 1982.

<sup>58</sup> Setting aside light work for miners who could no longer perform more strenuous tasks was still standard practice in the 1970s. For discussion, see: Joe Gormley, *Battered Cherub* (London: Hamilton, 1982), p. 111. Various scholars have determined that the coal industry functioned as a 'sheltered workshop' for injured and disabled miners. Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change*, p. 7; Bonsall, 'The Somerset Coalfield', p. 124; Stephen W. Town, *After the Mines: Changing Employment Opportunities in a South Wales Valley* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978), pp. 46-48.

self-esteem by providing them with continued access to the workplace and the social and cultural benefits that colliery work conferred.<sup>59</sup> They typically, however, did not entirely remove miners from the dusty conditions that led so many to develop lung disease. In the early 1960s, Jones' condition was reassessed, and his level of impairment was found to have increased to thirty percent. He left the industry at this point, approximately thirteen years after his initial diagnosis, and took a job in an aluminium works.

Jones presented this formal reassessment of his health as something of a watershed moment in his working life – the point at which he was no longer willing to accept the risks that came with working in the coal industry and the toll the work was exacting upon his body: 'I carried on with ten percent but as soon as they put another twenty percent on me I finished'.<sup>60</sup> Later, however, he reveals that the decision to leave the industry was not made so abruptly as this initial recollection suggests. When Jones stated that he left the Seven Sisters pit in 1962, a year before it closed, Francis asked whether this early departure was a result of him seeking 'better opportunities elsewhere'. This, Jones denied, instead explaining: 'my health had been going for a number of years, so my wife persuaded me to give it up'.<sup>61</sup> Here Jones expressed that his decision to leave the coal industry was made reluctantly. Conversations about his future employment had extended into the domestic sphere. His portrayal of his wife's role in this decision-making process is revealing of the tension he experienced between what he wanted – to stay in the

---

<sup>59</sup> The impact of disablement on miners' sense of their masculinity and identity is briefly discussed by: Curtis and Thompson, "This is the Country of Premature Old Men", *Cultural and Social History*, pp. 594-595.

<sup>60</sup> SWML, AUD/657, Phil Jones.

<sup>61</sup> SWML, AUD/657, Phil Jones.

industry – and what he ultimately felt he needed to do – leave. His decision to leave ultimately meant that he was opting-out of the traditional end of the miners' lifecycle. Leaving the industry meant accepting the limitations of his body and leaving behind a version of his own masculine self which had been forged in response to working conditions underground.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the primary impact of older men choosing to leave the industry – as Jones did – was felt by the individuals themselves as they changed the trajectory of their working lives. By comparison, the cumulative effects of the NCB's attempt to decrease the number of older men in the industry, which began in the late 1950s and continued well into the following decades, had potential for far broader implications. In 1959, the NCB introduced compulsory retirement for all men aged 65 or over – a measure that saw approximately 15,000 of the oldest miners across Britain leave the industry within the year.<sup>62</sup> Discussion of the effects of this decision did not feature as part of the schedule for the Second Coalfield Project interviews. A later voluntary retirement scheme for miners aged 60 or older, however, was recalled by William Cleaver who had previously been a colliery manager and who was, by the time of his interview, the Deputy Director of the South Wales Area of the NCB.<sup>63</sup> His recollections reveal that these targeted efforts had unintended consequences:

These chaps were usually very good workers. They usually did the ordinary mundane jobs that now you have to put, train young people to do and they don't want to do it particularly. They want

---

<sup>62</sup> Retirement statistics drawn from approximates given by the NUM in: Will Whitehead, 'The President's Industrial Notes: Miners are Losing Faith in the Industry', *The Miner*, 7. 4 (July/August 1959), p. 4 and D. D. Evans, 'The General Secretary Writes: Old Miners Face Compulsory Retirement', *The Miner*, 7. 5 (Sept/Oct 1959), p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Ashworth (with Pegg), *The British Coal Industry, Volume 5*, p. 412.

to do the more glamorous coal mining, bigger earning jobs. So that you now no longer have this number of workforce, if you like, who were quite content to live out the rest of their working lives doing little, easy – comparatively – jobs. Now you've got youngsters who find it a bit of an irk to get on the coal.<sup>64</sup>

Cleaver's account demonstrates that the performance of light work was not just important for ensuring the day-to-day functioning of the colliery, it also played an important social role. The work carried out by older and disabled miners was foundational to the system of work within the colliery on which the traditional lifecycle and understandings of masculinity and status were based. As Cleaver described, without these men, younger miners – who expected the opportunity to hone their strengths and skills on the coalface and earn the associated wage packet – could be denied access to the traditional routes of progression which symbolised manliness within the context of the mines. In this sense, departure of large scores of older men from the industry had potential to threaten the relationship the remaining miners had with the coal industry and, in doing so, challenge their perceptions of their own masculinity and working identity.

As this chapter has already demonstrated, there were a variety of circumstances which could lead miners to leave the coal industry of their own volition. The testimonies reveal, however, that the period surrounding the closure of one colliery and the amalgamation of the workforce into another could be particularly difficult for both miners and colliery management to navigate. In these cases, the highly localised nature of miners' working identities played a significant role in shaping their responses to the transfer offer. One particularly notable

---

<sup>64</sup> SWML, AUD/44, William Benjamin Cleaver.

incident, termed ‘the Great North Rhondda Fracas’ by Cleaver, concerned the closure of the North Rhondda Colliery in the Afan Valley and the arrangements made to transfer its workforce to nearby Glyncoerrwg in the summer of 1960.<sup>65</sup>

Cleaver’s recollections of these events highlight the difficulties which could emerge when management failed to account for the significance miners attached to these identities:

WC: ... that’s a peculiar pit. We closed that with 250 men in it and we would have thought it was the perfect closure answer because they were walking through Glyncoerrwg yard half a mile in the rain to their job every morning. And we asked them to stop at Glyncoerrwg and go underground at Glyncoerrwg, we got about six out of 250.

I: And the rest left the industry.

WC: Um [confirms yes].

I: Good God.

WC: Hmm, perfect, perfect closures. You thought you know you’ve got it all going your way. We wanted the men in Glyncoerrwg and here they were travelling through the yard every morning to a jungle safari almost to go up, up the mountain. They wouldn’t go down a pit. Drift men, they wouldn’t go down a pit.<sup>66</sup>

Publicly, the NCB claimed that the decision to close North Rhondda was made primarily on grounds of exhaustion – an assessment that the lodge secretary, Mr J. Ackery, rejected. The view of the lodge, and that expressed by the *Glamorgan Advertiser*, was that the closure decision had been taken specifically with the intention of increasing manpower at Glyncoerrwg.<sup>67</sup> This belief was not unfounded. In line with their policy of concentrating manpower in a small number of ‘super pits’ and highly redeveloped older collieries, the NCB had spent £4.5 million

---

<sup>65</sup> SWML, AUD/44, William Benjamin Cleaver.

<sup>66</sup> SWML, AUD/44, William Benjamin Cleaver.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Miners Moving Out of Afan Valley’, *Glamorgan Advertiser*, 19 August 1960, p. 1.

redeveloping Glyncoirwg and had been actively seeking to increase manpower at the site for some months.<sup>68</sup> In June 1960, the NCB posted job adverts in the local paper promising that this investment would ensure 'absolutely secure employment' for 'many years to come'.<sup>69</sup> Cleaver's testimony reveals that regardless of the state of the coal reserves, colliery management viewed the closure of North Rhondda as a convenient means of achieving their manpower targets at Glyncoirwg. As Cleaver emphatically describes above, however, he – and the NCB more broadly – had been labouring under the misapprehension that this state of affairs would be broadly accepted by the workforce.

Whilst Cleaver's account provides us with valuable insight into circumstances surrounding the failed transfer agreement, his recollection of the number of men who accepted this offer should be treated with scepticism. Indeed, other estimates suggest that closer to a third of the North Rhondda workforce transferred to Glyncoirwg.<sup>70</sup> The question of what historians should do with potentially inaccurate claims has been considered by Alessandro Portelli in his article exploring the subjectivity of the interviewee within oral histories. Portelli identifies the need for historians to do more than simply dismiss 'errors' of recollection, arguing that we 'need to interrogate the reasons for the error, its meaning'.<sup>71</sup> This approach allows historians to consider what truth *is* being expressed and explore the possible explanations for the disconnect within the

---

<sup>68</sup> 'Miners Moving Out', p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> National Coal Board: South Western Division, 'Men and Boys Wanted in the Collieries of the No.2 (Maesteg) Area', *Glamorgan Advertiser*, 10 June 1960, p. 4 and 17 June 1960, p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> The *Glamorgan Advertiser* reported that eighty men (approximately one third of the workforce) accepted the transfer offer in the two weeks immediately following the closure. See: 'Miners Moving Out', p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Portelli, 'Living Voice', *Oral History Review*, pp. 247-248.

testimony. In this vein, Cleaver's account can be understood as an expression of hyperbole. His recollections, whilst not an accurate assessment of manpower movement between the two collieries, provide insight into his initial reaction to the transfer failure. His exaggeration emphasises both his own incredulity and the chasm between the priorities of the NCB and the workforce.<sup>72</sup> The rationale the men provided for rejecting this offer – that they were drift men and did not want to work in a pit – was met with a similar level of disbelief. Over time, Cleaver came to appreciate the significance of the distinction the North Rhondda miners were drawing between drift mines and pits. When he returns to the topic of the 'great North Rhondda fracas' later in his interview, he reflects with greater sensitivity on the significance miners attached to their specific place of work, demonstrating how his own perception of these events had evolved since their occurrence.

Before we explore how Cleaver's understanding of these events developed over time, it is first necessary to revisit the scholarship of John Sewel who proffered, as part of his study of colliery closures and social change, an erroneous explanation as to why the North Rhondda miners rejected this transfer offer.<sup>73</sup> As discussed above, much of Sewel's study is concerned with how industrial geographies on a local scale influenced the occupational decisions miners made in response to pit closures. When considering the reasons why miners were sometimes reluctant to accept an offer of transfer, he noted, for example, the

---

<sup>72</sup> The interviewer's emphatic response to this incredulity is out of character with his usual style of intervention. Given Cleaver's hyperbolic articulation of the mass rejection, it would appear that the interviewer was mirroring this incredulity in order to provide the response that Cleaver would have expected in this setting.

<sup>73</sup> Sewel does not specifically name either North Rhondda or Glyncoerrwg, but the contextualising details he provides makes the identity of the collieries apparent. Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change*, p. 25.

disruption and inconvenience miners could experience if they were expected to travel long distances to their new place of work.<sup>74</sup> On the topic of transfer reluctance, however, Sewel also attempted to address a factor which he argued was less openly discussed within mining communities: namely, the fears miners had about adjusting to a new colliery. In the case of the North Rhondda miners, this argument hinged on the distinction between how the men accessed their place of work. North Rhondda was a drift mine, which meant that the miners could walk in and out using a pathway driven into the side of the hill. By comparison, Glyncoerrwg was a pit and accessing the coalface involved dropping down a pit shaft in a high-speed cage. Fear of this descent, Sewel claimed, was the reason so many of the North Rhondda miners chose to leave the industry.<sup>75</sup>

The evidence that Sewel provides to support this argument is flimsy at best. He notes that a 'number of men' from North Rhondda 'appealed to a redundancy pay tribunal on the grounds that they were psychologically incapable of going down a pit shaft'.<sup>76</sup> He does not cite this source, nor has it been possible to locate any documentation in support of his claim. Without recourse to interrogate this source further, we must approach this issue from another angle. The autobiographies of British miners attest in their multitude to the frightening experience of the first descent.<sup>77</sup> For most, this experience coincided with their

---

<sup>74</sup> Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change*, p. 24.

<sup>75</sup> Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change*, p. 25.

<sup>76</sup> Sewel, *Colliery Closure and Social Change*, p. 25.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example: Tomlinson, *Coal-Miner*, p. 59; A. J. Parfitt, *My Life as a Somerset Miner* (1930; repr. Radstock: Radstock Museum, 2005), p. 8; Parkinson, *True Stories of Durham Pit Life*, pp. 17-19; Roger Dataller, *From a Pitman's Notebook* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924), pp. 16-20; Smith, *Seven Steps in the Dark*, pp. 38-39; Jones, *Unfinished Journey*, pp. 69-70; Davies, *In Search of Myself*, p. 35; Edwards, *From the Valley I Came*, p. 41; Morgan, *My Lamp Still Burns*, p. 66.

first day of work after leaving school. In this way, the first descent underground marked the start of the transition from boyhood to manhood for pit miners. Regardless of whether a miner worked in a drift or a pit, however, there was much to be afraid of when working underground; becoming inured to these dangers was a marker of this transition that applied to all miners. Fear was not something to avoid, but rather something to become accustomed to. Indeed, contrary to Sewel's claim that such things were rarely spoken about amongst miners or within mining communities, *The Miner* published an article on this very topic. The article, written by Peter A. Tudor, a miner from Neath, is a retelling of his first experiences of the Cefn Coed pit following his transfer from Onllwyn drift mine (circa 1964). Tudor does not shy away from describing his feelings of anxiety and the 'slight nervousness' he felt at the prospect of descending to the pit bottom. The article ends, however, with a description from Tudor that indicates that one experience was sufficient for him to overcome this fear: '...never again would I know such an experience as that first near-half-mile descent...'.<sup>78</sup> The publication of this article is indication of broad recognition by South Wales Union leadership of how disconcerting the experience of the first descent could be. It can be read as an attempt to normalise these feelings and, most importantly, as a reminder that miners would become inured to this experience also. With this in mind, the claim that insurmountable fear prevented the North Rhondda miners from accepting the Glyncoed transfer appears to fly in the face of the prevalent construction of masculinity that existed within the coal industry. Put another way, leaving the

---

<sup>78</sup> Peter A. Tudor, 'From "Drift" to "Pit": A First Experience', *The Miner*, 12. 4 (July/August 1964), p. 9.

industry on these grounds would not have been compatible with the North Rhondda miners' perceptions of their own masculinity and working identity.

If fear was not the catalyst that prompted the departure of the North Rhondda miners, what was? The question of why these miners chose to leave the industry is one that Cleaver returned to later in his interview:

... [mining is] like a club you know. If your pub shuts, I suppose you're reluctant to go to another pub until you get its atmosphere in you. I think it's a club really, a pit is almost a club. You know you've got a feeling of belonging, and when you've been there a long time of course, it's part of your life isn't it.<sup>79</sup>

When sufficient time had passed to allow his initial frustrations to dissipate, Cleaver came to understand the failure of this transfer as predominantly an issue of identity. Miners' working identities were attached, he realised, not to the industry itself, but to the specific colliery in which they worked. In this sense, the transfer would have enabled the North Rhondda workforce to outwardly maintain their general status as 'miners', whilst requiring them to come to terms with the loss of their colliery-specific identity. With this in mind, Cleaver's earlier recollections of the rationale North Rhondda miners gave for their departure – that they were '[d]rift men, they wouldn't go down a pit' – can be understood in a different light. Rather than an expression of insurmountable fear, this statement should be understood both as a declaration of the miners' own working identity and masculinity, and of their unwillingness to renegotiate this identity in response to a new and alien work environment.

---

<sup>79</sup> SWML, AUD/44, William Benjamin Cleaver.

The moment at which miners were confronted with the loss of their colliery specific identity varied from place to place. In the case of the North Rhondda miners, the stark difference between drift and pit ensured this confrontation happened at the moment the transfer was offered. Elsewhere, however, this was something that miners experienced once already employed in their new colliery. Throughout Elliot's long tenure at Penallta he witnessed men from five different collieries arrive in the pit. The first amalgamation took place in 1964 following the closure of Nine Mile Point.<sup>80</sup> Though most of these transfers were managed successfully, the first, he acknowledges, was a failure that resulted in many of the Nine Mile Point men leaving the industry. In his testimony, Elliot reflects on the reasons for this failure and the lessons learned by the colliery management and lodge officials:

...the mistake was made of putting these men in block on one face, so they remained as Nine Mile Point men. This system we've tried to avoid since, and we try to assimilate anybody coming in, so they lose their identity as Britannia men, Bargoed men all like that. They become Penallta men quicker ... they were put in a face, which was not an easy face to earn money on, they were put on a price list that was five pence less than the price list in Nine Mile Point and the result was that in a few months the majority of the men had finished.<sup>81</sup>

Here, Elliot explicitly recalls the challenge of assimilating the Nine Mile Point workforce as an issue of workplace identity. Penallta management had presumably been operating on the assumption that allowing the Nine Mile Point

---

<sup>80</sup> Alongside the men from Nine Mile Point, Elliot recalled that Penallta received men from Risca (closed 1966), Elliot (1967), Wyllie (1968) and Groesfaen (1968) in the 1960s, as well as from Ogilvie (1975) and Bargoed (1977) in later years: SWML, AUD/123, Brian Elliot. For colliery closure dates see: SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Colliery Closures'.

<sup>81</sup> SWML, AUD/123, Brian Elliot.

men to maintain the social bonds that they had developed within their old colliery would make the transition to the new workplace a smoother process. In reality, as Elliot describes, the effect was quite the opposite. By keeping the miners together as one cohesive group, the Nine Mile Point men were disincentivised from forming bonds with their new colleagues. Working alongside their old workmates also served to continually remind them of the way things had been before the transfer. In this case, Penallta did not compare favourably in their eyes, particularly, as Elliot notes, in relation to wages.

Despite having already outlined the failure of the Nine Mile Point transfer, when Elliot's interviewer later asked him whether any of the various workforces transferred to Penallta during this period had been 'more difficult than others?', he was reluctant to answer:

BE: I'd say...Well, I don't like to say.

I: Why not?

BE: No, no more difficult, I think they all faced the same problems. I think Nine Mile Point, I think was the largest amount of men we had and I think they had the, they had the hardest job to accept Penallta standards then. They thought we was superhuman with square-nosed shovels, whereas they always used the round shovels, and they felt that they were working for the price list which was chicken feed and I only remember an old member, party member saying about Nine Mile Point as the cockpit of South Wales.<sup>82</sup>

Elliot's recollections indicate that he was surprised by how difficult the Nine Mile Point men found the process of adjusting to the working environment in Penallta. His expectations of their capability had been set by the conversation he recalled

---

<sup>82</sup> SWML, AUD/123, Brian Elliot.

having with an older miner at some point prior to the transfer. The description he recalled hearing from this miner – that Nine Mile Point was ‘the cockpit of South Wales’ – has intriguing connotations. Whilst this perhaps most obviously alludes to the reputation for militancy that the pit had gained in earlier decades, the imagery evoked also brings to mind a working culture that valued a particularly self-confident – even brash – and physically intimidating form of masculinity.<sup>83</sup> When Elliot worked alongside these men at Penallta, however, he found that they did not live up to this hardman reputation. In this sense, his discomfort with the idea of describing the Nine Mile Point men as ‘difficult’ perhaps stemmed from his perception that this was an acutely embarrassing situation for them.

The primary issue underpinning this embarrassment was the difficulty the Nine Mile Point miners had in adjusting to what appeared to be, on first glance, a relatively minor difference in coal production method. Despite this seemingly negligible difference, Elliot’s recollections indicate that the difference between square-nosed and round shovels had a notable impact on the miners’ sense of their own strength and capability. Square-nosed shovels were harder to manoeuvre in tight spaces than round shovels, and their ability to scoop up larger quantities of coal made them heavier to lift – a factor which would have been increasingly obvious to the miners with prolonged usage. The use of these square-nosed shovels served to stratify the workforce along old colliery lines, with Nine Mile Point men unable to match the ‘superhuman’ display that was an everyday feat for Penallta miners. It would appear, therefore, that Elliot used the term

---

<sup>83</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. 113-133.

'superhuman' as a euphemism for 'more masculine'. This situation was made worse by the price list which paid the miners considerably less than they were used to at their old colliery. In this way, the place of work (specifically the negotiated price list attached to this place), and method of production worked to immediately undermine Nine Mile Point miners' perceptions of their own status. Strength, skill, expertise and pay – all markers of masculinity which they had either honed or earned over the course of their working lives – could not be translated across to a coalface in a different colliery.

The testimonies explored above have shed light on a variety of factors that led miners to leave the industry of their own volition. Regardless of whether they left following a decline in working conditions, a failed transfer agreement, or a re-evaluation of their personal circumstances, the decision to leave demonstrates their engagement with the process of disentangling their perceptions of their own masculinity from their working identity. In other words, their departure required these miners to determine that the performance of mining labour need no longer be a central pillar in their perception of their own masculinity. Their engagement with this disentanglement process is indicative of a broader cultural shift in how masculinity was understood and performed in the South Wales coalfield. The construction of masculinity which had been dominant in the coalfield throughout the first half of the twentieth century was no longer suited to many miners. They instead turned to a broader, society-wide construction of masculinity predicated on the fulfilment of the breadwinner role.

This, of course, raises an interesting question: what did this renegotiated version of masculinity look like? If employment in the coal industry was not central to its construction, what was? Somewhat ironically, the central component of this renegotiated version of masculinity is most clearly evident in the testimonies of those who recalled miners expressing a desire to leave the industry but not having the means to do so. Berwyn Howells, the lodge official working in the Garw valley who experienced union quiescence on the issue of pit closures as a moral injury, recalled the emotional toll exacted upon miners by the threat of pit closures when alternative employment opportunities were insufficiently available: ‘...men don’t cry for work underground if they’ve got a nice job to go to in a car factory ... They just don’t do it! So, when they’re crying to us about their job, there was nothing else to go to...’<sup>84</sup> In an indication of the widespread nature of discussions pertaining to the future of men’s employment in the coalfield, the language we first saw Elliot use to contrast colliery work with ‘nice’ jobs in factories is similarly adopted here by Howells. In comparing the coal industry to the manufacturing sector, Howells implies that he, and many of the miners he represented, had no particular love of minework itself. Indeed, he had earlier described the colliery in which he worked as ‘arduous, dirty, stinking place’.<sup>85</sup> The broader point that Howells sought to make, however, was that being cognisant of the supposed benefits of working outside of the coal industry meant little in areas where alternative employment opportunities remained low. His recollections indicate that miners’ priorities lay, not in preserving access to mining labour specifically, but in ensuring their continued

---

<sup>84</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

<sup>85</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

access to the labour market. As part of the same discussion, Howells reflected on the significance attached to the status of being employed: 'I think there's dignity in jobs. I'm not one for saying that a man should work down a pit, it's not bad though mind. But er, certainly the dignity of a job is his right'.<sup>86</sup> His statements reveal that, for those who actively sought (or wished for) employment outside of the coal industry, access to acceptable masculinity was still primarily governed by the ability of men to work. The state of being employed, however, mattered more than the type of work performed.

These priorities were echoed by the Chairman of the National Colliery, Bill Woods, when he led the ill-fated fight against the colliery's closure in 1968. In a comment which indicated there was a widespread preference amongst the colliery's workforce for alternative employment, he stated: 'We don't want to keep the National open because we like going down the pit. We'd rather work in a chocolate factory if we could only get one in the Rhondda'.<sup>87</sup> Woods' reference to the chocolate factory seems to have been deliberately chosen for rhetorical effect. He perhaps sought to directly compare the working conditions of the mine and the more essential purpose it served to a luxury manufacturing industry which already existed elsewhere in the coalfield.<sup>88</sup> He may even have been hoping to evoke the

---

<sup>86</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

<sup>87</sup> As recalled by Ken Hopkins, Borough Education Officer, in his introduction to *Rhondda Past and Future*, a published collection of public lectures on the topic of the Rhondda which were held in the valley in 1972 and 1973: K. S. Hopkins 'Introduction' in *Rhondda Past and Future* (Rhondda: Rhondda Borough Council, (c. 1975), p. xiv.

<sup>88</sup> Whilst no such factory existed in the Rhondda valley specifically, chocolates had been produced elsewhere in the South Wales coalfield since the late 1930s. Initially, production was based in the newly established Treforest Industrial Estate. The site moved on a number of occasions as business expanded before settling in Dowlais, near Merthyr Tydfil, in 1963, where it is still in operation today. 'The Story of O.P Chocolates: Growth of a Great Enterprise', *Pontypridd Observer*, 14 January 1950, p. 14; *Case Study: Sustainability Training Programme: O. P Chocolate Limited*,

image of the fictional factory depicted in Roald Dahl's popular children's novel, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, published four years earlier in 1964.<sup>89</sup>

Regardless, the reference underscored a willingness to forgo high status work for the opportunity to leave the mines behind. As with Howells' recollections, however, the purpose of this statement appears to have been to express how little these preferences mattered if alternative work was not available. For the men at the National, colliery employment – and consequently their working identity as miners – was only worth fighting for because there was not a sufficient source of alternative employment opportunities available.

Collectively, the statements of both Howells and Woods demonstrate that the two models of masculinity which co-existed in the South Wales coalfield in this period were not wholly distinct from each other. They shared characteristics. Both were primarily underpinned by the performance of paid labour. How do we account for these commonalities? The notion that multiple patterns of masculinity could exist simultaneously in any given society, culture, or organisation was an original feature of Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (see Chapter Two).<sup>90</sup> The plurality of masculinities is now a widely accepted idea within the broad field of gender studies. When Connell and James W. Messerschmidt revisited the concept of hegemonic masculinity in 2005, they provided a framework that would allow the interplay between various constructions of masculinity to be explored. This framework emphasised the significance of the

---

Food Skills Cymru, c. 2022, [https://cynnalcywru.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/220322-FSC-O.P.-Chocolate-Limited\\_Case-study-ENG.pdf](https://cynnalcywru.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/220322-FSC-O.P.-Chocolate-Limited_Case-study-ENG.pdf) [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> February 2025].

<sup>89</sup> Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).

<sup>90</sup> R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp. 295-300.

geography of masculinities, determining that masculinities could be analysed at three levels: local, regional, and global.<sup>91</sup> By 'local' the authors meant masculinities constructed 'in arenas of face-to-face interaction of families, organizations, and immediate communities', whilst regional masculinities referred to those constructed at the level of the nation-state.<sup>92</sup> Variations of local hegemonic masculinities often, they noted, had shared characteristics – a development which could be explained, at least in part, by the interplay of local models of masculinity with 'society-wide gender dynamics'.<sup>93</sup> Local constructions of hegemonic masculinity are likely to share features with the regional model of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>94</sup> When considered in this light, the dominant construction of masculinity which existed in the coalfield before the era of mass pit closures can be understood as an occupation-specific variation of a more broadly constructed working-class masculinity. Changes in the regional economy created the circumstances in which miners could renegotiate their perceptions of masculinity in such a way that disentangled manliness from the performance of mining labour whilst still drawing on underlying society-wide notions of what it meant to be a working-class man.

This process of renegotiation did not end when miners made the decision to leave the industry. (Ex-)miners also had to adjust to the realities of their new place of work. Their testimonies reveal that some were able to find ways of preserving aspects of their working identity that they had first cultivated in the mines. This

---

<sup>91</sup> R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, 19. 6 (2005), pp. 849-851.

<sup>92</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity', *Gender and Society*, p. 849.

<sup>93</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity', *Gender and Society*, p. 850.

<sup>94</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity', *Gender and Society*, pp. 850-851.

was the case for Will Rees, who left Cwmllynfell Colliery in 1948 because of ill health and took a job in the Perry Chain factory which manufactured bicycle brake hubs. Before leaving Cwmllynfell, Rees had been an active member of the lodge – a role that afforded him some status as a representative of his fellow miners. When he moved to Perry Chain he was ‘made convenor right away’ because of his previous union experience.<sup>95</sup> Speaking on the difference in Trade Union consciousness between the two places, Rees stated:

The biggest problem in my opinion, in the factories, women have got no idea of trade union work or what they're entitled to. So it's very difficult to explain to the women what's right and what's wrong. It's easier for the men to understand than the women.<sup>96</sup>

It is (very) tempting to read the gendered generalisations Rees proffers here as evidence of little more than a misogynistic mindset concerning the position of women within the trade union movement. The demographics of the Perry Chain workforce, however, indicate that his recollections on this matter should not be wholly dismissed as such. Over half of the workforce at Perry Chain, Rees recalled, were women, and the remaining portion was made up almost entirely of men who had left the coal industry because of ill-health. These men had come from an environment where the purpose and values of trade unionism were embedded into the training and education they received as boys from older, more experienced miners. As Rees came from this environment himself, his recollections of these differences between the men and women in the factory can more favourably be interpreted as evidence of his surprise at the cultural differences between the two

---

<sup>95</sup> SWML, AUD/259, Will ‘Post’ Rees, Interviewed by Hywel Francis, April 1974.

<sup>96</sup> SWML, AUD/259, Will ‘Post’ Rees.

workplaces. A 'between the lines' reading of these reflections indicates that Rees took pride in developing the union consciousness of the Perry Chain workforce. He later recalled, for example, leading the workforce to its only ever strike – a dispute over hours and pay during a turndown in demand – which came to a successful end after only one day: 'we cleared the path that day' he recalled for the situation to be 'put right there and then'.<sup>97</sup> Rees, then, was able to preserve aspects of his previous working identity through the adoption of this new leadership role. Indeed, the relative inexperience of approximately half of the workforce in union matters appeared to afford him a degree of moral authority that he had not previously experienced – a theme which emerges in his repeated references to 'right' and 'wrong' in the union context. His status as a local union leader continued to play an important role in his working identity even after Perry Chain closed in the 1950s and he returned to the mining industry; Rees held the position of General Secretary at Abernant Colliery throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>98</sup>

Miners like Rees, who had chosen to leave the industry, were often asked to reflect on their experiences of working in both the mining and manufacturing sectors. Their recollections often shed light on which aspects of their previous working identity they most missed. The common theme to emerge from these testimonies concerns the social bonds that the men had formed within the mines. Jones – who left the industry in the early 1960s after his level of disablement from pneumoconiosis was re-evaluated at thirty percent – recalled that the low morale

---

<sup>97</sup> SWML, AUD/259, Will 'Post' Rees.

<sup>98</sup> SWML, AUD/259, Will 'Post' Rees.

caused by pit closures had not much affected his own feelings towards his employment there:

PJ: But for all that I enjoyed my period underground, there was close comradeship, different to what you find in the factory. It were play hard and work hard.

I: Why do you think it was so different in the factory?

PJ: Well, I don't know. Perhaps it was that you grew up together and were brought up together as boys – very close.<sup>99</sup>

Jones' reflections speak to the interconnectivity of community and colliery social bonds in mining communities. Workmates often shared familial connections or were neighbours within the same town or village. His 'play hard...work hard' comment suggests that he missed the intensity of both mining labour and the friendships which extended beyond the colliery. His description of these social bonds as 'comradeship' also underscores this point. In the mines, these connections developed in response to the dangerous and physically demanding nature of minework itself. The conditions of the mine, and the shared experiences of this working environment was not something that could be replicated in the factory setting. Jones also tentatively suggests the longevity of these relationships between miners as a reason for these close bonds. In this sense their shared experiences began even before they entered the workforce, with the knowledge that their working life would be spent in the coal industry.<sup>100</sup>

Jones' recollections reveal that he had mixed feelings about his decision to leave the colliery that persisted even up to the time of his interview in 1982. As was

---

<sup>99</sup> SWML, AUD/657, Phil Jones.

<sup>100</sup> Jones was born c. 1915 and began working in the industry in the 1930s when opportunities for work outside of the industry were very limited. SWML, AUD/657, Phil Jones.

discussed earlier in this chapter, his departure was part of a process of coming to terms with his failing health and physical capacity. His acceptance of this situation, however, did not prevent him feeling a sense of nostalgia for the social ties developed underground. This combination of mixed feelings was similarly captured in *Duw, It's Hard*, a song by Max Boyce – a Welsh singer and comedian who spent eight years working underground before leaving the industry in the 1960s for a job in a factory. A live version of this song was recorded in 1973 at a concert held at the Treorchy Rugby Club in the Rhondda.<sup>101</sup> This recording included a short introduction by Boyce, spoken directly to the live audience, in which he comments on the varied nature of miners' emotional responses to pit closures: 'Lots of people were sad when colliery closures came to South Wales, but as one who'd worked underground for a long time, I wasn't particularly sad. And I wrote this song when they closed the little colliery down in my valley'. Despite this assessment of his own feelings, his lyrics, accompanied by mournful music, capture feelings of grief and nostalgia alongside a sense of gladness and relief. The end of the third verse, in particular, echoes Jones' feelings regarding his health and personal ties to the industry:

But I can't forget the times we had  
The laughing through the fear  
'Cause everytime I cough I get  
A mining souvenir.<sup>102</sup>

Though Boyce was mostly unknown at the time of this recording, the audience's

---

<sup>101</sup> Max Boyce, 'Duw It's Hard – Live at Treorchy', *Live at Treorchy* (1995) [Spotify, accessed on 27 May 2025].

<sup>102</sup> Max Boyce, 'Duw It's Hard'.

response was favourable and warm, suggesting that he had managed to capture the emotional complexity of miners' responses to the rundown of the industry.

For some, the loss of the particular social environment of the mines was an unsettling experience that extended beyond feelings of nostalgia. This was the case for Ronald Rowlands, whose movement in and out of the coal industry over the course of his working life set the scene for this chapter. On his second departure from the industry (his first having been for military service), Rowlands took a job in the Royal Ordnance Factory in Usk, but returned to mining after just twelve months. When asked what it was like to work in the factory, Rowlands recalled feeling:

Completely divorced from the pit, I mean you go from the pit to a factory where there's a different environment, different everything you see. I found that my, my place was back in the mines as soon as possible ... I missed the grassroots. It was the grassroots, the comradeship you know, the unity of the men. I'd made a mistake there was no question about that.<sup>103</sup>

Though Rowlands had left Hafodyrynys of his own volition, it appears that he only truly realised what he valued most from his working environment – close social bonds – once he had experienced working somewhere that did not provide this. His reflections on how he felt after leaving the industry reveal the emotional significance he attached to these relationships. Specifically, he spoke of feeling 'divorced from the pit' – a phrase which couched his relationship with Hafodyrynys in familial terms. To further underscore this point, Rowlands later described the pit he returned to after leaving the factory as 'homely': '...it was a family pit, where you

---

<sup>103</sup> SWML, AUD/117, Ronald Clayton Rowlands.

knew everyone, you knew the next-door neighbour'.<sup>104</sup> His reference to the 'grassroots' of the mining industry can also be read in these terms as a desire to return to where he felt a sense of connection and belonging. Rowlands' was unequivocal in his desire to return to the coal industry. The scale of the adjustment required to move from surface work to the factory floor proved too great a change, and the homosocial bonds of the colliery – developed through shared experience and mutual understanding of the colliery environment – proved impossible to replicate elsewhere.

This chapter has considered the impact of structural change within the regional economy on miners' perceptions of their own masculinity and working identity. In doing so, I have demonstrated that the range of constructions of masculinity available to the men of the coalfield was dependent on economic reality. The combined effects of pit closures and the diversification of employment opportunities created the circumstances in which miners could renegotiate their masculinity in such a way that removed the requirement for the performance of mining labour. Consequently, a plurality of masculinities emerged within the coalfield with many miners redrawing the boundaries of their understanding of acceptable masculinity in line with broader, society-wide notions of what it meant to be a working-class man. This renegotiation process was rejected by some and undertaken with varying degrees of willingness by others. For men like Brian Elliot at Penallta colliery, being a miner – with all of its cultural and social significance – proved foundational to perceptions of the self. Under such conditions, the

---

<sup>104</sup> SWML, AUD/117, Ronald Clayton Rowlands.

prospect of leaving the coal industry could be viewed as little other than a direct threat. For many, however, economic diversification brought with it a new sense of agency over occupational decision making and a chance to reimagine their futures outside of the coal industry.

Using miners' testimonies to explore the rationale that underpinned their decisions to leave the coal industry has also enabled this chapter to build on existing scholarship concerning miners' occupational decision making in this period. In doing so, this chapter has added nuance to a picture that previously prioritised broad trends over individual experience. This approach has also enabled me to complicate our understanding of the role that the lifecycle and geography played in mediating miners' occupational decision making. In relation to the lifecycle, this chapter has broadened the scope of discussion by considering the effect of economic change on boys who had yet to join the industry. This is a story that was told primarily through their absence (from both the testimonies and the industry) and, consequently, has considerable scope as an avenue for future research. The testimonies of older and disabled miners also served to challenge conventional narratives by shedding light on the opportunity that alternative employment provided for the prioritisation of health and physical wellbeing. Further to this, this chapter also considered the possible consequences of early retirement on those remaining in the industry; the light work performed by older and disabled miners served a vital function in propping up the hierarchy of mining labour that had developed in response to the system of coal production across the South Wales coalfields. The highly localised nature of miners' perceptions of their masculinity and working identity were revealed through an exploration of their

experiences of pit transfers. This NCB policy, once touted in the House of Commons as one of the organisation's 'greatest successes', often produced disappointing results as miners struggled – and often failed – to successfully translate their skills, expertise and sense of belonging from one colliery environment to another.<sup>105</sup>

The final portion of this chapter focused on miners' experiences of adjusting to work within the manufacturing sector. In doing so, it demonstrated that the process of renegotiating masculinity which began before miners left the coal industry continued into these new working environments. Within these new workplaces, (ex-)miners sometimes found ways to preserve aspects of their colliery-specific identity; union work, for example, could provide an avenue for retaining an element of status and expertise amongst new work colleagues. For many, the most challenging aspect of this adjustment process was coming to terms with the loss of the particular homosocial environment of the colliery. Many miners reflected with nostalgia on the close social bonds they had formed with their fellow miners. Though these were all men who had left the industry of their own volition, some found that the loss of these social bonds proved insurmountable. The desire to regain access to this close social environment was the driving factor behind some miners' decision to return to the industry.

---

<sup>105</sup> HC Deb 20 vol 667 cc1122-1123.

## Conclusion

Over the course of approximately fifty years, c. 1920-1970, coal mining in Britain was transformed from a creaking behemoth of Victorian enterprise into a compact, modern and technologically efficient industry. Perhaps nowhere was this transformation starker than in the South Wales coalfield – a region where the coal industry had dominated the local economy for decades, where there had been few opportunities for alternative employment, and where challenging geological conditions created difficult working environments that inhibited the process of coal production. This thesis set out to explore South Wales miners' experiences of this transformation with the aim of determining the impact of industrial change on miners' perceptions of their masculinity and working identity. The published autobiographies and pre-existing oral testimonies of miners provided an incredible wealth and depth of material through which to explore this topic. Throughout this thesis I have drawn upon a range of other materials – newspapers, union periodicals, NCB publications, and government reports – and placed them in dialogue with the recollections of the miners in order to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Using these sources, I have argued that industrial change served to challenge miners' perceptions of their masculinity and working identity. Furthermore, I have argued that geography and the lifecycle were factors that mediated both miners' experiences of industrial change and the impact of these changes on their sense of self.

This thesis owes a debt of gratitude to Hywel Francis, Kim Howells and their fellow researchers who recognised the possibilities of oral history and the urgency

with which such projects were needed in the context of a rapidly changing coalfield. Their intent, across the First and Second Coalfield Projects, was to create a history of the coalfield in the twentieth century and, in doing so, they produced an invaluable resource for the historians of South Wales who came after them.<sup>1</sup> To date, relatively little scholarship has emerged from this collection, and even less which engages directly with the nature of the source material itself. The labour histories, which have been a mainstay of coalfield historiography, centre institutional and collective narratives and have paid little attention to the experience of the individual. This thesis therefore makes a notable contribution to the historiography of the South Wales coalfield by prioritising the voices of individual miners rather than the collective. In doing so, I have revealed that the very qualities which are sometimes used to dismiss the potential of personal testimony as a vehicle for exploring the past – namely, their limited number, exceptionality, and reliance on personal memory – can support a project on individual experience. By embracing the inherent subjectivity of miners' testimonies, we have gained insight into the inner world of individual miners and developed our understanding of how their experiences of the colliery environment served to shape their perceptions of their own identity, and the decisions they made about their employment. By remaining alert to the recurring themes and tropes that are revealed when miners' testimonies are studied side-by-side, it has also been possible to speak to the commonalities of miners' experiences. Crucially, these commonalities did not reveal a collective experience of minework

---

<sup>1</sup> *Audio Collection: South Wales Coalfield Collection*, <https://lisweb.swan.ac.uk/swcc/> [accessed 5 September 2025].

or a singular understanding of what it meant to be a man in a South Wales mining community. Rather, studying miners' testimonies side-by-side revealed shared experiences that were mediated by individual circumstance, affecting miners' perceptions of their masculinity and working identity in different ways.

The genre-specific conventions of autobiographical writing and life story telling have enabled me to place miners' experiences of industrial change within the context of their whole life narrative. As such, the structure of this thesis captures not only the rough chronology of industrial change, but also the life trajectory of those who worked in the industry in this period. An examination of miners' recollections of childhood revealed that their perceptions of masculinity and working identity were formed (at least for those who grew up in mining households) even before they began work in the pit. Here, the realities of the regional economy played a significant role in shaping their experiences. The near ubiquitous experience of poverty combined with the limited availability of alternative employment opportunities in the coalfield meant that boys grew up with the understanding that the colliery represented their future. Some took great pride in their familial connection to the industry, asserting their heritage as a marker of their life-long claim to a mining identity. Through their observations of older miners – often their fathers, but also other male relatives – boys came to understand something of the nature of mining labour and what was required of the men who performed this labour. In this way, physical strength, endurance, stoicism and the wage packet became familiar to boys as markers of masculinity. The division of labour within boys' childhood homes also led to boys developing an understanding of the established gender roles within mining communities. Many

came to anticipate – often as a consequence of dire financial circumstance – the point at which they too would be able to fulfil the role of family provider. In this way, miners' expectations of minework – and of the adult miner they would become – were determined, in no small part, by the formative circumstances of their childhood and the presence of older miners within the home.

Miners' testimonies reveal that leaving school and starting work in the coal industry was experienced by many as a key marker of the transition between boyhood and manhood. Not unexpectedly, I found that boys who entered the workforce in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century encountered an underground environment and coal production process that broadly reinforced their earlier perceptions of minework, masculinity and working identity. Their experiences underground did, however, serve to further broaden their understanding of what it meant to be a miner beyond what it had been possible for them to learn by observing older miners within their childhood home. Whilst growing up in a mining household served to alert boys to the physical strength miners required, it was not until boys started work for themselves that they realised the skill that was also involved in winning the coal. Furthermore, miners' recollections reveal that boys typically only became aware of the complexities of social relations underground once they joined the workforce. Those that joined the industry during the era of hand-got coal production discovered that there was a hierarchy of mining labour – and of masculinity – that was determined by the relative level of skill and strength required by specific job roles. Under the guidance of experienced miners, boys gradually achieved the markers of manliness that they had come to associate with the performance of mining labour. Whether as a

collier, haulier, or otherwise, their position within the hierarchy of mining labour became more secure over time as they developed the necessary strength, skill and experience to independently fulfil the requirements of their role. During this transitional period, miners honed both their perception and performance of masculinity in response to the underground environment, the division of mining labour and the coal production method. These findings speak to the significance of work as a site of masculine identity formation; they serve to emphasise the need for historians of masculinity to pay greater attention to the men's experiences within the work environment.

The central argument of this thesis is that industrial change challenged miners' perceptions of masculinity and working identity by disrupting their day-to-day experiences of minework and the colliery environment they had come to know. Chapters Two, Three and Four adopted a roughly chronological approach to exploring these changes within the industry. An exploration of miners' testimonies has revealed that, across this period, the response of a growing number of miners to industrial change was to renegotiate their perception of their own masculine identity. This renegotiation involved moving away from an occupation-specific understanding and towards a broader, society-wide construction of working-class masculinity that centred the breadwinner role. This started as a gradual process. The significance of occupation-specific markers of masculinity – which many had aspired to since childhood – were eroded over time by changes in the nature of work brought about by mechanisation. The pressure on miners to renegotiate their perception of their own masculinity in such a way that removed the need for mining labour increased in the 1950s and 1960s as pit closures threatened their

continued access to minework. The diversification of the regional economy provided miners with the opportunity to preserve their status as providers at the expense of their occupational identity. Many sought to leave the industry at this time in the hope of securing their long-term ability to earn a wage that would support themselves and their families. This thesis has shown that as other (occupation-specific) markers of masculinity fell away or became inaccessible to some miners, the outcome of work (the pay packet) and the ability to fulfil the breadwinner role remained central to miners' understanding of masculinity throughout this period.

Whether miners attempted to renegotiate their occupation-specific understanding of masculinity towards a broader construction premised on the breadwinner role was dependent on whether they were able (and willing) to reimagine their futures outside of the coal industry. In this way, the condition of the broader economy is revealed to be of as much relevance to miners' perceptions of their masculinity in the South Wales coalfield as the condition of the coal industry itself. I have also found that miners did not arrive at the reimagination process entirely independently. The NUM, the government and local MPs went to considerable efforts to convince miners of the merits of a 'nice job' in a factory.<sup>2</sup> There are similarities here between these findings, and Riley's critique of the questionnaire in which women indicated that they imagined leaving the workforce at the end of the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> Riley argued that the questionnaire reflected what women had been led to expect of their future. I have demonstrated that the

---

<sup>2</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

<sup>3</sup> Riley, "The Free Mothers", *History Workshop*, p. 62.

decision made by many South Wales miners to leave the industry was at least partially influenced by a future imagined for them by others.

Alongside this broad trend towards a construction of masculinity premised on the breadwinner role, this thesis has also revealed variation in terms of which aspects of their masculine and working identity miners sought to preserve. Whilst many miners were willing – to greater or lesser degrees – to sacrifice their occupational identity if it meant preserving their status as providers, others remained staunchly unwilling to leave minework behind. Some miners wished to protect not only their livelihoods but their colliery-specific occupational identities. The Taff Merthyr miners were a case in point. Motivated by a shared history and pride in the development of the colliery and its workforce, they undertook a successful productivity drive that saved the colliery from closure. Rather than looking for an alternative future, they sought to preserve a version of masculinity that was steeped in the history of the Taff Merthyr colliery.

Miners' personal testimonies revealed two factors that repeatedly served to mediate miners' experiences of, and responses to, industrial change. These factors were their location within the coalfield (geography), and their position in the lifecycle. Indeed, at the risk of stating the obvious, miners did not experience one without the other; at any given point miners occupied both a place in the coalfield *and* a position in the lifecycle. This thesis found that both factors often coalesced to collectively shape miners' experiences of industrial change and the impact of these changes on their perceptions of masculinity and working identity. This was the case for miners' experiences of mechanisation, job insecurity and pit closures,

but not for nationalisation. Geography played a negligible role in mediating miners' responses to the nationalisation of the industry because this change was nationally and uniformly implemented and was not in any way dependent on regional or colliery-specific circumstances.

By examining the testimonies of individual miners side-by-side, this thesis has revealed that miners' perceptions of their masculinity and working identity developed first in response to regional conditions and then also in response to highly localised colliery-specific circumstances. As discussed above, miners' recollections of childhood reveal that the widespread experience of poverty combined with the lack of alternative employment opportunities led many boys to feel that minework was inevitable. Those who grew up in mining households developed an understanding of established gender roles and what it meant to be a man in the South Wales coalfield through their observations of the gendered division of labour and older miners within the home. By comparing South Wales miners' recollections of childhood with the recollections of miners from other regions, this thesis has also shown that many of these experiences were common across the British coalfields. There was, however, some variation on account of regional differences in women's employment practices and the prevalence of Miner's Lung within the population.

As already established, once boys entered the mining workforce their perceptions of their masculinity and working identity developed in response to the underground environment, the division of labour, and the coal production method they were exposed to. These perceptions were challenged by the introduction of

mechanised mining methods. Geological conditions influenced both whether a coal face would be mechanised and what type of machine would be introduced. As such, miners' perceptions of their masculinity were challenged at different times and to varying extents. We saw, for example, that in collieries where coal conveyors were introduced but not coal cutters, the impact of mechanisation was felt to a greater degree by the hauliers whose jobs became obsolete. Where coal cutters were introduced, colliers also had to contend with the loss of the most skilled element of their role. These changes disrupted the established system of social relations underground, and the hierarchy of mining labour and masculinity.

This thesis has revealed that the highly localised nature of miners' masculinities and working identities became a challenge for both miners and colliery managers in the context of pit transfers. The final chapter of this thesis found that miners often struggled to translate these identities from one colliery environment to another. In some cases, the challenge posed by pit transfers was immediately obvious to miners. This was the case with the North Rhondda miners who were asked to transfer to nearby Glyncoirwg; they were drift miners and could not countenance the move to a pit. In other cases, however, we saw that even the miners themselves could be taken aback by the difficulties they experienced in translating their skills and experiences to new environments. This element of surprise occurred in situations where the difference in what was expected of miners during the course of their working day was seemingly more subtle (such as when the Nine Mile Point men were transferred to Penallta and had to use square-nosed rather than round-nosed shovels). Subtle differences, however, often belied more complex situations. The use of different shovels combined with a worse price

list at Penallta meant that several of the Nine Mile Point men's key markers of masculine status – strength, pay, and skill – were undermined by the transfer. After a short period, the transfer failed and many chose to leave the industry entirely. Part of the trend towards broader society-wide constructions of masculinity premised on the breadwinner role can therefore be explained by the inability of miners to preserve their colliery-specific identities when pits closed.

Studies of coal miners' masculinities have acknowledged the significance of region. Almost all of this existing scholarship has focused on the South Wales coalfield – a decision that has typically been informed by the economic circumstances which meant that the local population was highly dependent on the coal industry for their livelihoods. As such, we have developed a scholarly understanding of masculinity as it pertains to the South Wales coalfield as a *whole*. The degree of localised variation that this thesis has found in South Wales miners' perceptions of their masculinity and working identity demonstrates, however, that there is also a need for studies which take greater account of intra-regional variation in miners' experiences. To date, scholars have identified the need for research which adopts a comparative approach to coalfield studies.<sup>4</sup> Only Ward has adopted such an approach to questions of gender and working identity within the coalfield.<sup>5</sup> I anticipate that a fruitful avenue of future research for gender historians of the British coal industry would see a comparative coalfield approach combined with one which remained alert to colliery-specific variations in miners'

---

<sup>4</sup> *Towards a Comparative History of Coalfield Societies*, ed. by Stefan Berger, Andy Croll, and Norman LaPorte (Aldershot: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Ward, 'Drifting into Manhood and Womanhood', *Welsh History Review*, pp. 623-648.

masculinities and regional identities. Research of this type could allow us to discover, for example, whether a region such as Nottinghamshire – with comparatively more stable geological conditions – produced a similar level of colliery-specific variation in miners' masculinities and working identities as a region with more disrupted geology such as South Wales.

This thesis has also determined that a miners' position in the lifecycle served to mediate their experience of industrial change and its impact on their perceptions of their masculinity and working identity. Miners' recollections of mechanisation reveal that those whose masculinities were most severely challenged were the more established miners who had built a reputation for themselves as being good workmen based on skills that then became obsolete. Unlike strength, skill maintained much of its significance as a marker of masculinity throughout this period. Though its significance remained, many miners lost access to this marker as a result of changes in the coal production process. Highly skilled miners were still needed to operate and maintain the new machines, but these skills were very different to the ones miners had developed on hand-got production faces. A man's status as a highly skilled miner could not be easily re-earned once their position within the mining workforce became redundant. We saw this, for example, when coal conveyors made the role of hauliers obsolete. Some hauliers felt that mechanisation had denied them of the end to their career that they had anticipated throughout their working life. These men struggled to reimagine their future within the mining workforce and renegotiate their sense of their own masculinity because they felt they did not have enough time left in which to regain their standing through the development of new skills. At the opposite end

of the lifecycle, miners for whom the traditional markers of masculinity were still aspirational were somewhat protected from the impact of mechanisation because they had less status to lose and more time in which to adapt.

Existing scholarship has established that it was also older and disabled miners who were amongst those most at risk of unemployment and those most likely to try and remain within the coal industry as collieries closed.<sup>6</sup> A focus on individual miners has revealed, however, that this broad trend masks considerable variation in experience. This study has shown, for example, that industrial change could provide older miners with new solutions to the common coal industry-specific problems associated with ageing. The testimonies of some miners revealed that the diversification of the regional economy provided them with the opportunity to prioritise their health (by removing themselves from dusty environments in the coal industry) and their capacity to work. They, like their colleagues who were faced with the prospect of losing their job as a result of colliery closures, were willing to sacrifice their mining-specific identity in order maintain their ability to fulfil the breadwinner role. These findings demonstrate that the lifecycle served to mediate miners' perceptions of masculinity in a way that was neither singular or uniform. Its influence instead depended on a complex range of factors which included the availability of local sources of alternative employment.

This thesis has adopted the workplace-specific model of the lifecycle first advanced by Curtis and Thompson. This model, based on miners' experiences of

---

<sup>6</sup> Bonsall, 'The Somerset Coalfield', pp. 114-130.

the industry during private ownership, captured the common trajectory that miners could expect to progress through over the course of their working lives.<sup>7</sup> I have developed our understanding of the miners' lifecycle further by shedding light on the ways in which industrial change in the period c. 1920-1970 served to disrupt this model. Most important to note is that the level of disruption to the lifecycle increased over time in a manner that is broadly in alignment with the gradual process by which miners' perceptions of masculinity shifted away from an occupation-specific understanding towards a construction predicated on the breadwinner role. As discussed above, the mechanisation of the coal production process caused most disruption to towards the end of the lifecycle as individual miners experienced a mismatch between the years they had spent at work and their new, decreased skill level. Disruption intensified during the 1950s and 1960s as mechanisation continued and miners also contended with prolonged periods of job insecurity. During this period, the model outlined by Curtis and Thompson increasingly bore less resemblance to the way in which miners experienced the industry. Younger men increasingly opted out of the industry after gaining their formal NCB qualifications. An absent, unidentifiable group of young men – who, had they lived in previously decades, would have become miners – never joined the industry at all. At the opposite end of the lifecycle, older miners sometimes chose to leave of their own volition in order to prioritise their health, and sometimes experienced redundancies as appropriate light work could not be found for them in the collieries that remained open. Neither were the men in the

---

<sup>7</sup> Curtis and Thompson, "This is the Country of Premature Old Men", *Cultural and Social History*, pp. 587-606

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

middle of the lifecycle spared disruption. These men, who expected that they would be performing the most skilled, demanding and high-paying jobs, sometimes found that they were asked to take on work previously set aside for older and disabled miners who had since left the industry. By 1970, the occupation-specific model of the lifecycle that described miners' career trajectories during the era of private ownership had broken down.

By exploring South Wales miners' experiences of industrial change in the period c.1920-1970, this thesis has made a number of contributions to the fields of labour and gender history. To date, labour historians of the British coal industry have prioritised institutional and collective narratives that have allowed them to trace the development of the industry and working-class institutions. Unions have often been allowed to speak as the voice of the worker. This study, however, has demonstrated that prioritising individual voices enables an exploration of the significance that workers themselves attached to industrial developments (including union policy). This approach also has the potential of capturing a wider range of voices than those who appear in official union records. These voices do not have to be representative in order to be revealing. I have demonstrated this most notably through the consideration of Berwyn Howells' reflections on the union's policy of quiescence regarding pit closures. Howells' testimony contained the most emotionally charged account of dissatisfaction with this union policy – a response which could only be explained as a moral injury resulting from the conflict between what his position as a lodge officer required of him and what he

believed was the morally appropriate course of action.<sup>8</sup> Whilst others did not respond so strongly, there were many who shared similar concerns. By examining the individual testimonies of these miners' side-by-side it became possible to draw broader conclusions about their understanding of the relationship between morality, collective action, and masculinity – and why some were able to navigate this relationship more easily than Howells. As such, this thesis calls for labour historians to engage more directly with the wealth of pre-existing oral testimonies and autobiographical writings that capture the experiences of individual working-class men and women.

Much of the scholarship providing a gender-based analysis of the British coal industry is concerned with what happens to miners' masculinities and the gendered division of labour when miners are out-of-work. As such, there has been very little focus on miners' experiences of work itself. The development of this scholarship also reflects broader trends in the field of gender history; working-class men's experiences of unemployment have drawn much attention, as have their leisure pursuits. This thesis has demonstrated the greater depth of understanding that can be gained of the relationship between masculinity and working identity through an examination of the changes in the nature of work, the working environment, and social relations in the workplace. In this way, I add to Smith's call for historians to pay greater attention to the everyday experience of work.<sup>9</sup> I would, however, supplement Smith's suggestion that historians take

---

<sup>8</sup> SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, 'Reimagining working-class masculinities', in *Men and Masculinities*, ed. by Houlbrook, Jones and Mechen, pp. 136-157.

account of the role region plays in mediating men's experiences with a call for the lifecycle to also be included as a mediating factor.

By examining the period between approximately 1920 and 1970, this thesis is the first study to provide a gender-based analysis of the South Wales coalfield for the period between 1945 and 1970. I have demonstrated that many of the themes that emerge through a study of masculinity in the earlier part of the century continue to appear in similar or altered forms in the era of public ownership. By tracing miners' evolving perceptions of the significance of strength, skill, and the pay packet, for example, this thesis has demonstrated how and why miners' perceptions of their own masculinity and working identity changed in this period. Change, however, also characterised miners' experiences of work in the decades after 1970. Indeed, these were to be some of the most disruptive years in the history of the South Wales coalfield. For the miners who continued working in the industry in this period, the disruption they experienced contained the grain of familiarity. Many of the challenges that they had navigated in the 1950s and 1960s emerged again as issues during this final stage of the history of coal mining in Britain. Collective action returned to the fore during the 1972 and 1974 disputes, and later the 1984-5 national strike. Job insecurity never truly went away; collieries continued to close in South Wales at a rate of one or two a year throughout the 1970s before the closure programmes picked up pace again following the miners' defeat in 1985.<sup>10</sup> In 1994, when the industry was on the precipice of privatisation, the last deep-mine in South Wales, Tower colliery, faced closure. Rescue came in

---

<sup>10</sup> SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Colliery Closures'.

the form of the miners themselves who bought the colliery and operated it as a private business until its permanent closure in 2008.<sup>11</sup> With one exception, this is a story that historians of masculinity in the coalfield are yet to tell.<sup>12</sup> This thesis sets the stage for future work that examines how miners continued to grapple with the impact of these industrial developments on their perceptions of their masculinity and working identity as the industry drew to a close.

---

<sup>11</sup> 'Tower's Ours', *Aberdare Leader*, 20 October 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Gildart, Curtis, Perchard, and Millar, "Be a Miner", *International Review of Social History*, pp. 258-284.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

#### **Autobiographies**

Bullock, Jim, *Them and Us* (London: Souvenir Press, 1972).

Bullock, Jim, *Bowers Row: Recollections of a Mining Village* (Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1976).

Coombes, B. L., *These Poor Hands* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1939).

Coombes, Bert, *A Miners' Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1945).

Dataller, Roger, *From a Pitman's Notebook* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924).

Davies, D. R., *In Search of Myself* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1961).

Davies, Walter Haydn, *The Right Place, The Right Time* (Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1975).

Edwards, Wil Jon, *From the Valley I Came* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1956).

Ellis, Tom, *Mines and Men: Mining Engineering* (Reading: Educational Explorers, 1971).

Evans, Einion, *Nearly a Miner* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1994).

Gormley, Joe, *Battered Cherub* (London: Hamilton, 1982).

Griffiths, James, *Pages from Memory* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1969).

Hitchin, George, *Pit Yacker* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962).

Horner, Arthur, *Incorrigible Rebel* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1960).

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Jones, Jack, *Unfinished Journey* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938).

Lawson, Jack, *A Man's Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1944; repr. 1946).

Morgan, Robert, *My Lamp Still Burns* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1981).

Moffat, Abe, *My Life with the Miners* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1965).

Parfitt, A. J., *My Life as a Somerset Miner* (1930; repr. Radstock: Radstock Museum, 2005).

Parkinson, George, *True Stories of Durham Pit-Life* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1912; repr. [n.p.]: Forgotten Books, 2012).

Paynter, Will, *My Generation* (London: George Allen & Unwin).

Smith, Bob, *Seven Steps in the Dark: A Miner's Life* (Ayrshire: Luath Press, 1991).

Tomlinson, G. A. W., *Coal Miner* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1937).

Weaver, Richard, *Life Story*, ed. by James Paterson (Kilmarnock: John Ritchie, [1897(?)]; repr. [n.p.]: Cornell University Library Digital Collections, [n.d.]).

### **Oral testimonies**

SWML, AUD/20, Bowden Thomas George, interviewed by Kim Howells, 5 March 1980.

SWML, AUD/21, Berwyn Howells, interviewed by Kim Howells, 3 March 1980.

SWML, AUD/44, William Benjamin Cleaver, interviewed by Kim Howells, 6 May 1980.

SWML, AUD/62, William Thomas Goode, interviewed by Kim Howells, 28 March 1980.

South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

SWML, AUD/64, Harold Wilson, interviewed by Kim Howells, 1980.

SWML, AUD/66, Elwyn Gwyn Williams, interviewed by Kim Howells, 6 May 1981.

SWML, AUD/76, Hywel Jeffreys (alias Jeff Camnant), interviewed by Tim Exton, 15  
November 1982.

SWML, AUD/101, Haydn Morgan Harrison, interviewed by Kim Howells, 3 March  
1981.

SWML, AUD/110, Brian Williams, interviewed by Kim Howells, 31 January 1980.

SWML, AUD/117, Ronald Clayton Rowlands, interviewed by Kim Howells, 4 June  
1981.

SWML, AUD/121, Terence Clark, interviewed Kim Howells, 13 February 1980.

SWML, AUD/123, Brian Elliot, interviewed by Kim Howells, 7 May 1981.

SWML, AUD/128, Llewellyn Morgans (with comments from Berwyn Howells),  
interviewed by Kim Howells, 3 March 1980.

SWML, AUD/134, Haydn Mathews, interviewed by Kim Howells, 22 October 1980.

SWML, AUD/144, Clifford Eric James Davies, interviewed by Kim Howells, 7 May  
1980.

SWML, AUD/147, Edward Thomas, interviewed Kim Howells, 21 May 1982.

SWML, AUD/150, Edward George Pritchard, interviewed by Kim Howells, 7 May  
1980.

SWML, AUD/159, David Ronald Jones, interviewed by Hywel Francis, 11 July 1980.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

SWML, AUD/196, William 'Box' Thomas, interviewed by Hywel Francis and David Smith 30 May 1973.

SWML, AUD/233, Mr and Mrs Ivan Rosser, interviewed by Alun Morgan, 27 March 1974.

SWML, AUD/259, Will 'Post' Rees, interviewed by Hywel Francis, April 1974.

SWML, AUD/265, Gwilym Williams, interviewed by Hywel Francis 17 May 1974.

SWML, AUD/288, John Williams, interviewed by Hywel Francis, 23 July 1974.

SWML, AUD/390, John Evans, interviewed by George Ewart Evans, c. 1960-1979.

SWML, AUD/381, Don Hayward and Emlyn Jenkins, interviewed by Hywel Francis, 19 June 1976.

SWML, AUD/392, George Evans, interviewed by George Ewart Evans, c. 1960-1979.

SWML, AUD/452, Dai Francis, interviewed by David Egan, c. 1979-1982.

SWML, AUD/657, Phil Jones, interviewed by Hywel Francis, 3 December 1982.

### **Official Records and Publications**

*Coal Industry Commission Act, 1919. Interim Report by the Honourable Mr. Justice Sankey, G.B.E.*, Cmd. 84 (London: HMSO, 1919).

Coal Industry Commission, *Volume II: Reports and Minutes of Evidence on the Second Stage of the Inquiry*, Cmd. 360 (London: HMSO, 1919).

Department of Employment, *British Labour Statistics, Historical Abstract 1886-1968* (London: HMSO, 1971).

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Ministry of Fuel and Power, *Coal Mining: Report of the Technical Advisory Committee*, Cmd. 6610 (London: HMSO, 1945).

Ministry of Fuel and Power, *The Future of the Coal Miner; How Coming Changes Mean a New Deal and New Opportunities for All Who Work in the Coal Industry: A Brief Explanation Based on the Reid Report* (London: HMSO, 1946).

*Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry (1925)*, Cmd. 2600 (London: HMSO, 1926).

### **Hansard**

HC Deb 29 July 1936 vol 315 cc1660-1661.

HC Deb 20 November 1962 vol 667 cc1122-1123.

### **Legislation**

*Coal Industry Nationalisation Act 1946* (9 and 10 Geo 6, c.59) (London: HMSO, 1946).

*Distribution of Industry Act, 1945* (8 & 9 Geo. 6) (London: HMSO).

Education Act, 1918 (8 & 9 Geo 5, c.39) (London: HMSO).

Elementary Education Act 1880 (43 & 44 Vict, c.23) (London: HMSO).

Elementary Education (School Attendance) Act (1893) Amendment Act, 1899 (56 & 57 Vict, c.51) (London: HMSO).

Mines (Prohibition of Child Labour Underground) Act, 1900 (63 & 64 Vic, c. 21).

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Mines and Collieries Act, 1842 (5 & 6 Vict, c. 99) (London: George E. Eyre & Andrew Spottiswoode).

*Schedule of Reserved Occupations (Provisional)*, Cmd. 5926 (London: HMSO, 1939).

### **Trade Union Documents and Publications**

National Coal Board and National Union of Mineworkers, *National Power Loading Agreement* (National Coal Board, 1966).

SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board South Wales Area, 'General Statistics (South Wales Coalfield)', [1976].

SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, Public Relations Department, 'The South Wales Coalfield: Annual Manpower and Saleable Output 1855-1946', [c. 1976].

SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board Public Relations Department, 'Annual Manpower and Saleable Output of the South Wales Coalfield, 1890-1978', [1979(?)].

SWML, HD 9551.5 GRE, National Coal Board, 'Colliery Closures – South Wales, Forest of Dean and Somerset Coalfields, 1947-79', [1979(?)].

### **Political Party Publications**

*Coal: The Labour Plan* (London: National Council of Labour, 1936).

Labour Party Research Department, *Handbook: Facts and Figures for Socialists 1951* (London: The Labour Party, 1950).

*Let Us Face the Future: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation* (Labour Party, 1945), as reproduced in *British General Election*

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

*Manifestos, 1918-1966*, ed. by F. W. S. Craig (Chichester: Political Reference Publications, 1970).

*Report of the Sixty-Second Annual Conference of The Labour Party, Scarborough, 1963* (London: The Labour Party, 1963).

### **Newspapers**

*Aberdare Leader*

*Glamorgan Advertiser*

*The Miner: The Magazine of the South Wales Area of the NUM*

*Neath Guardian*

*Pontypridd Observer*

*Porthcawl Guardian*

*Port Talbot Guardian*

*South Wales Daily News*

*South Wales Echo*

*South Wales Gazette*

*Western Mail*

### **Music**

Max Boyce, 'Duw It's Hard – Live at Treorchy', *Live at Treorchy* (1995) [Spotify, accessed on 27 May 2025].

### **Miscellaneous Publications**

Coombes, B. L., 'The Flame', *New Writing*, 3 (1937); facsimile repr. *Penguin New Writing*, 4 (1941), pp. 62-66.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Dahl, Roald, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).

*Democracy in the Mines: Some Documents of the Controversy on Mines*

*Nationalisation up to the time of the Sankey Commission*, ed. by Ken

Coates, pp. 16-30.

Departments of History and Economic History, *The South Wales Coalfield History*

*Project: Final Report*, (University College, Swansea, 1974).

## Websites

*Audio Collection: South Wales Coalfield Collection*,

<<https://lisweb.swan.ac.uk/swcc/>> [accessed 5 September 2025].

Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Historical Coal Data: Coal*

*Production, Availability and Consumption, 1853 to 2024* (2025),

<<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/historical-coal-data-coal-production-availability-and-consumption>> [accessed 06/10/2025].

Food Skills Cymru, 'Case Study: Sustainability Training Programme: O. P

*Chocolate Limited*', (c. 2022) [https://cynnalcymru.com/wp-](https://cynnalcymru.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/220322-FSC-O.P.-Chocolate-Limited_Case-study-ENG.pdf)

[content/uploads/2022/03/220322-FSC-O.P.-Chocolate-Limited\\_Case-study-ENG.pdf](https://cynnalcymru.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/220322-FSC-O.P.-Chocolate-Limited_Case-study-ENG.pdf) [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> February 2025].

South Wales Coalfield Collection, <<https://www.swansea.ac.uk/swcc/>> [accessed

26/07/2022].

## Secondary Sources

### Books

Abrams, Lynn, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

Adeney, Martin, and John Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike 1984-5: Loss Without Limit*  
(London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

Allen, Vic, *The Militancy of British Miners* (Shipley: The Moor Press, 1981).

Ariès, Philippe, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. by  
Robert Baldick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

Arnold, Jörg, *The British Miner in the Age of De-Industrialization: A Political and  
Cultural History: A Political and Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University  
Press, 2024).

Arnot, R. Page, *The Miners*, 4 vols (London: George Allen Unwin, 1949-1979) I-IV.

Ashworth, William, (with the assistance of Mark Pegg), *The History of the British  
Coal Industry, Volume 5, 1946-1982: The Nationalized Industry* (Oxford:  
Clarendon Press, 1986).

Beckett, Francis and David Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line: The Miners' Strike  
and the Battle for Industrial Britain* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2009).

Benson, John, *British Coal Miners in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History*  
(London: Longman, 1989).

Bruley, Sue, *The Women and Men of 1926: A Gender and Social History of the  
General Strike and Miners' Lockout in South Wales* (Cardiff: University of  
Wales Press, 2010).

South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Burnett, John, *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1974).

Burnett, John, *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education, and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1982).

Buxton, Neil K., *The Economic Development of the British Coal Industry from Industrial Revolution to the Present Day* (London: Batsford Academic, 1978).

Church, Roy, and Quentin Outram, *Strikes and Solidarity: Coalfield Conflict in Britain 1889-1966* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Cockburn, Cynthia, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London: Pluto Press, 1991).

Connell, R. W., *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

Connell, R. W., *Masculinities*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

Cunningham, Hugh, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (London: Longman, 1995).

Curtis, Ben, *The South Wales Miners, 1964-1985* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).

Dawson, Graham, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Dennis, Norman, Fernando Henriques, and Clifford Slaughter, *Coal is Our Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Tavistock Publications, 1969).

South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

- Edwards, Ness, *History of the South Wales Miners' Federation* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1938).
- The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984-5*, ed. by Raphael Samuel, Barbara Bloomfield and Guy Boanas (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).
- Francis, Hywel, and David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980).
- Francis, Hywel, *Miners' Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984).
- Gildart, Keith, *North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity, 1945-1996* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001).
- Gillis, John R., *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).
- Goberman, Leon, *From Depression to Devolution: Economy and Government in Wales, 1934-2006* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017).
- Gray, Steven, *Steam Power and Sea Power: Coal, the Royal Navy, and the British Empire, c. 1870-1914* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
- Hickman, Tom, *Called Up, Sent Down: The Bevin Boys' War*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2008).
- Hobsbawm, Eric J., *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984).

South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Hobsbawm, Eric J., *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997; repr.

London: Abacus, 2007).

Hodges, Frank, *Nationalisation of the Mines* (London: Leonard Parsons, 1920).

Jameton, Andrew, *Nursing Practice: The Ethical Issues* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ:

Prentice Hall, 1984), p. 6.

Jevons, H. Stanley, *The British Coal Trade* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner &

Co, 1915).

John, Angela, *By the Sweat of Their Brow* (London: Croom Helm, 1980).

Jones, Bill, and Chris Williams, *B. L. Coombes: Writers of Wales* (Cardiff:

University of Wales Press, 2017).

King, Laura, *Family Men: Fatherhood & Masculinity in Britain, 1914-1960* (Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2015).

Kirby, M. W., *The British Coalmining Industry, 1870-1946: A Political and Economic*

*History* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1977).

Koch, Tom, *Ethics in Everyday Places: Mapping Moral Stress, Distress, and Injury*

(Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

Lummis, Trevor, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (London:

Hutchinson, 1987).

*Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. by Michael Roper and

John Tosh (London: Routledge, 1991).

South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

- Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America 1800-1940*, ed. by J.A. Mangan and J. Walvin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).
- McIvor, Arthur, and Ronald Johnston, *Miners' Lung: A History of Dust Disease in British Coal Mining* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).
- Mitchell, B. R., *Economic Development of the British Coal Industry, 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- Molendijk, Tine, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict: Political Practices and Public Perceptions*, (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2021).
- Parker, M. J., *Thatcherism and the Fall of Coal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- Passerini, Luisa, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, trans. by Robert Lumley and Jude Bloomfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- Portelli, Alessandro, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).
- Renshaw, Patrick, *The General Strike* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975).
- Roberts, Elizabeth, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
- Rose, Sonya O., *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
- Sewel, John, *Colliery Closure and Social Change: A Study of a South Wales Mining Valley*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1975).

South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

- Summerfield, Penny, *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).
- Andrew Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics*, 2 vols (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003; 2005) I-II.
- Taylor, Robert, *The TUC: From The General Strike to New Unionism*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).
- Thompson, E. P., *The Making of the English Working Class*, New Edition (London: Penguin Books, 2013).
- Thompson, Steven, *Unemployment, Poverty and Health in Interwar South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006).
- Tosh, John, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (London: Yale University Press, 1999).
- Towards a Comparative History of Coalfield Societies*, ed. by Stefan Berger, Andy Croll, and Norman LaPorte (Aldershot: Routledge, 2005).
- Town, Stephen W., *After the Mines: Changing Employment Opportunities in a South Wales Valley* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978).
- Vincent, David, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London: Europa, 1981).
- Ward, Stephanie, *Unemployment and the State in Britain: The Means Test and Protest in 1930s South Wales and North East England*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Webber, Emily, P. Webber, *Mining Men: Britain's Last Kings of the Coalface* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2025).

Williams, Chris, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield 1898-1947* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998).

### Journal Articles

Beckwith, Karen, 'Gender Frames and Collective Action: Configurations of Masculinity in the Pittston Coal Strike', *Politics & Society*, 29: 2 (2001), pp. 297-330.

Bonsall, Penny, 'The Somerset Coalfield, 1947-1973: Attitudes and Responses to Pit Closures in the Post-Nationalisation Era', *Southern History Society*, 11 (1989), pp. 114-130.

Bornat, Joanne, 'A Second Take: Revisiting Interviews with a Different Purpose', *Oral History*, 31. 1 (2003), pp. 47-53.

Boyns, Trevor, 'Of Machines and Men in the 1920s', *Llafur*, 5. 2 (1989), pp. 30-39.

Boyns, Trevor, 'Jigging and Shaking: Technical Choice in the South Wales Coal Industry Between the Wars', *Welsh History Review*, 17. 2 (1994), pp. 230-251.

Broomfield, Stuart, 'The Apprentice Boys' Strikes of the Second World War', *Llafur*, 3. 2 (1981), pp. 53-67.

Bruley, Sue, 'The Politics of Food: Gender, Family, Community and Collective Feeding in South Wales in the General Strike and Miners' Lockout of 1926', *Twentieth Century British History*, 18. 1 (2007), pp. 54-77.

South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Buckley, Sheryl Bernadette, 'The State, the Police, and the Judiciary in the Miners'

Strike: Observations and Discussions, thirty years on', *Capital & Class*, 39.

3 (2015), pp. 419-434.

Burns, Alan, Martin Newby and Jonathan Winterton, 'The Restructuring of the

British Coal Industry', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 9 (1985), pp. 93-

110.

Cardell, Kylie, and Kate Douglas, 'Telling Tales: Autobiographies of Childhood and

Youth', *Prose Studies*, 35: 1 (2013), pp. 1-6.

Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking

the Concept', *Gender and Society*, 19. 6 (2005), pp. 849-851.

Curtis, Ben, and Steven Thompson, "A Plentiful Crop of Cripples Made by All This

Progress": Disability, Artificial Limbs and Working-Class Mutualism in the

South Wales Coalfield, 1890-1948', *Social History of Medicine*, 27. 4 (2014),

pp. 708-727,

Curtis, Ben, and Stephen Thompson, "This is the Country of Premature Old Men":

Ageing and Aged Miners in the South Wales Coalfield, c.1880-1947',

*Cultural and Social History*, 12. 4 (2015), pp. 587-606.

Daunton, M. J., 'Down the Pit: Work in the Great Northern and South Wales

Coalfield, 1870-1914', *The Economic History Review*, 34. 4 (1981), pp. 578-

597.

Elliot, Rosemary, 'Growing Up and Giving Up: Smoking in Paul Thompson's 100

Families', *Oral History*, 29. 1 (2001), pp. 73-84.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

- Gallwey, April, 'The Rewards of Using Archived Oral Histories in Research: The Case of the Millennium Memory Bank', *Oral History*, 41. 1 (2013), pp. 37-50.
- Gildart, Keith, Ben Curtis, Andrew Perchard, and Grace Millar, "'Be a Miner": Constructions and Contestations of Masculinity in the British Coalfields, 1975-1983', *International Review of Social History*, 69. 2 (2024), pp. 258-284.
- Goldthorpe, John H., 'Technical Organization as a Factor in Supervisor-Worker Conflict', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 10. 3 (1959), pp. 213-230.
- Greasley, David, 'The Diffusion of Machine Cutting in the British Coal Industry, 1902-1938', *Explorations in Economic History*, 19 (1982), pp. 246-268.
- Howard, W. S., 'Miners' Autobiography: Text and Context', *Labour History Review*, 60. 2 (1995), pp. 89-98.
- Jameton, Andrew, 'A Reflection on Moral Distress in Nursing Together With a Current Application of Concept', *Bioethical Inquiry*, 10. 3 (2013), pp. 297-308.
- Knight, Abigail, Julia Brannen and Rebecca O'Connell, 'Re-using Community Oral History Sources on Food and Family Life in the First World War', *Oral History*, 43. 1 (2015), pp. 63-72.
- Lawrence, Jon, 'Class, "Affluence" and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain, c.1930-64', *Cultural and Social History*, 10. 2 (2013), pp. 273-299.
- Morgan, W. John, 'The Miners' Welfare Fund in Britain 1920-1952', *Social Policy & Administration*, 24. 3 (1990), pp. 199-211.

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

- O’Leary, Paul, ‘Masculine Histories: Gender and the Social History of Modern Wales’, *Welsh History Review*, 22. 2 (2004), pp. 252-277.
- Penlington, Neil, ‘Masculinity and Domesticity in 1930s South Wales: Did Unemployment Change the Domestic Division of Labour?’ *Twentieth Century British History*, 21. 3 (2010), pp. 281-299.
- Penn, Roger, and Rob Simpson, ‘The Development of Skilled Work in the British Coal Mining Industry, 1870-1985’, *Industrial Relations Journal*, 17. 4 (1986), pp. 339-349.
- Perchard, Andrew, Keith Gildart, Ben Curtis, Grace Millar, ‘Fighting for the Soul of Coal: Colliery Closures and the Moral Economy of Nationalization in Britain, 1947-1994’, *Enterprise & Society*, 26. 2 (2025), pp. 485-518.
- Portelli, Alessandro, ‘Living Voices: The Oral History Interview as Dialogue and Experience’, *Oral History Review*, 45. 2 (2018), pp. 239-248.
- Ramsden, Stefan, ‘Remaking Working-Class Community: Sociability, Belonging and ‘Affluence’ in a Small Town, 1930-80’, *Contemporary British History* 29. 1 (2015), pp. 1-26.
- Riley, Denise, ‘“The Free Mothers’: Pronatalism and Working Women in Industry at the End of the Last War in Britain’, *History Workshop*, 11 (1981), pp. 58-118.
- Ritchie, Elizabeth, and Neil Bruce with contributions by Helen Barton, Jamie Bockover, and Hayley Taylor, ‘“Take Up the Man and Lay Down the Boy”: Defining Rural Childhood in Northern Scotland During the Enlightenment’, *Northern Scotland*, 12. 1 (2021), pp. 86-96.

South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

- Taylor, Andrew J., 'The Miners and Nationalisation, 1931-36', *International Review of Social History*, 28. 2 (1983), pp. 176-199.
- Thompson, Paul, 'Re-using Qualitative Research Data: A Personal Account', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1. 3 (2000), <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1044> [accessed 5 September 2025].
- Tosh, John, 'What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Some Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain', *History Workshop*, 38. 1 (1994), pp. 179-202.
- Trist, E. L., and K. W. Bamforth, 'Some Social and Psychological Consequences of the Longwall Method of Coal-getting', *Human Relations*, 4. 1 (1951), pp. 3-38.
- Ward, Stephanie, 'Drifting into Manhood and Womanhood: Courtship, Marriage and Gender Among Young Adults in South Wales and the North-East of England in the 1930s', *Welsh History Review* 26. 4 (2013), pp. 623-648.
- Ward, Stephanie, 'Miners' Bodies and Masculine Identity in Britain, c. 1900-1950', *Cultural and Social History*, 18: 3 (2021), pp. 443-462.
- West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman, 'Doing Gender', *Gender and Society*, 1. 2 (1987), pp. 125-151.
- Wilson, Adrian, 'The Infancy of the History of Childhood: An Appraisal of Philippe Ariès', *History and Theory*, 19. 2 (1980), pp. 132-153.

Winterton, Jonathan, 'Social and Technological Characteristics of Coal-face Work: A Temporal and Spatial Analysis', *Human Relations*, 47. 1 (1994), pp. 89-118.

### **Chapters in Edited Collections**

Barratt-Brown, Michael, 'Coal as a Nationalised Industry', in *Studies in the British Coal Industry*, ed. by D. J. Forsyth and D. M. Kelly (Oxford: T&T Publications), pp. 95-134.

Barron, Ava, 'On Looking at Men: Masculinity and the Making of a Gendered Working-Class History,' in *Feminists Revision History*, ed. by Ann-Louise Shapiro (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), pp. 146-171.

Goldthorpe, John H., 'Intellectuals and the Working Class in Modern Britain', in *Social Stratification and Economic Change*, ed. by David Rose (London: Hutchinson, 1988), pp. 39-56.

Hopkins, K. S., 'Introduction' in *Rhondda Past and Future* (Rhondda: Rhondda Borough Council, (c.1975), pp. ix-xiv

Mak, Ariane, 'Conspicuous Consumption in Wartime? Welsh Mining Communities and Women in Munitions Factories', in *Gender and the Second World War: Lessons of War*, ed. by Corinna Peniston-Bird and Emma Vickers (London: Palgrave, 2017), pp.55-72.

Peniston-Bird, Corinna M., 'Oral History: The Sound of Memory', in *History Beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed. by

South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 105-121.

Rose, Sonya O., 'Temperate Heroes: Concepts of Masculinity in Second World War Britain', in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, ed. by Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 177-195.

Smith, Helen, 'Reimagining working-class masculinities in the twentieth century', in *Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain: A History of the Present*, ed. by Matt Houlbrook, Katie Jones and Ben Mechen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), pp.136-157.

Summerfield, Penny, 'Dis/composing the Subject: Intersubjectivities in Oral History', in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, ed. by T. Cosslett, C. Lury and P. Summerfield (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 91-106.

Thompson, Steven, "'Can You Look in the Mirror and Say, I See a Man?" Masculinity and the Labour Movement in South Wales, c. 1870-1939', in *Gender in Modern Wales: Perspectives on Masculinity and Femininity in Wales from 1750 to 2000*, ed. by Beth Jenkins, Paul O'Leary, and Stephanie Ward (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2023), pp. 91-119.

**Unpublished PhD Thesis**

## South Wales Coal Miners and Industrial Change, c. 1920-1970

David Selway, 'Collective Memory in the Mining Communities of South Wales',

(unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2017).

### **Reference texts**

Armstrong Twigg, Seth, 'Bert Lewis Coombes (1893-1974), coal miner and writer',

in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <https://biography.wales/article/s12->

COOM-LEW-1893 [accessed 23 September 2025].

Frank Hodges, *Nationalisation of the Mines* (London: Leonard Parsons, 1920), p. ix.



