

‘Like being on death row’: Britain and the end of coal, c. 1970 to the Present¹

Jörg Arnold

Abstract

The introduction draws on the work of Raymond Williams to identify the ‘structures of feeling’ that surround the figure of the coal miner in contemporary British culture. As an analysis of the media coverage of the closure of the UK’s last deep-coal mine in December 2015 demonstrates, mine workers were cast as ‘residual proletarians’ whose modes of being and consciousness were portrayed as both admirable and pitifully out of date. The introduction goes on to demonstrate the dominance that selective memories of the miners’ strike of 1984/85 exert over contemporary understandings of coal mining. Drawing on the work of Williams again, the introduction reflects on how certain images and tropes have reached hegemonic status while others have been marginalised. The introduction concludes by arguing that historical scholarship must extricate itself from the stranglehold of ‘1984/85’ and contends that the true significance of coal for contemporary British history lies in the extraordinary range of emotions, meanings and significations with which both the industry and the miners were invested by the contemporaries themselves.

Keywords: miners; coal industry; structures of feeling; residual proletarians; community.

Introduction

In December 1973, during a parliamentary debate on the prospect of a second national coal strike in two years, Roy Mason, Labour MP for Barnsley Central and former Minister of Power, ended his passionate defence of the miners’ cause on a personal note. He told the House of Commons of the 14 years that he had spent down the pit and of the ‘awful memories’ he held of this time.² He had seen men killed by his side and his father crippled for life. Mason drew on lived experience of conditions in the industry as they had prevailed in the 1940s, but suggested that, on far too many occasions, the tragedies of the past were repeated in the present. Mason concluded his intervention by acknowledging a fundamental ambivalence at the heart of his case for the coal miners. He demanded that mineworkers be adequately rewarded for their strenuous efforts and sacrifice. At the same time, Mason also

looked towards a future in which there would be no more need for men working underground altogether. He exclaimed:

Working underground in a coal mine is not a life for any man. It is not fair on his wife. It is not fair on his family. It is a pity that we cannot close all the mines tomorrow-but we cannot. The nation depends upon them. That is why we must pay the miners, and pay them well, until that day of the final closure gloriously arrives.³

Forty-two years later, in 2015, the ‘day of the final closure gloriously’ of which Mason had spoken did arrive at last, after a slow and agonising run-down of the British coal industry, punctuated by temporary reversals and violent convulsions..⁴ With the closure of Hatfield Colliery in June 2015, Thoresby in July, and finally Kellingley in December, the history of deep-coal mining in the UK came to an end. Yet, there were few celebrations, neither among miners nor the country at large. As Keith Paulson, branch secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), told *The Guardian’s* north of England editor a few days before the stopping of production at Kellingley colliery, ‘It is like being on death row [...]. We can see the warden coming down the corridor, hear him jangling his keys’. Speaking of how ‘angry’ and ‘upset’ the miners were, Paulson summed up the mood thus, ‘The lads are finding it difficult to come to terms with being thrown on the industrial scrap heap’.⁵

This special issue takes the recent closure of the last coal mine in the UK as a starting point for re-examining the place of the industry in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century Britain, and for exploring broader questions about the significance of coal for understanding contemporary British history. It brings together a set of distinguished scholars from England, Scotland and Germany, comprising historians as well as sociologists, senior as well as junior academics. While the individual authors bring their own approaches to bear and employ their own research angles, the contributions are held together by a shared concern with the intersection between coal miners and society at large. Collectively, they explore the overlaps and tensions between the self-images of coal miners, on the one hand, and the broader societal constructions of ‘the coal miner’ on the other. These broader imaginaries were layered politically, socially, but also temporally, with, just as in Mason’s speech, images and ideas from the past exerting a powerful hold on the present. It was inside these broader articulations that coal miners operated and tried to forge a future for themselves and their industry, their families and their communities.

Who were the coal miners, and who was to say? Were miners just ‘ordinary’ workers or were they ‘special’? Did they embody the essence of Britishness or represent a foreign aberration? Were they a remnant from the past or did they have a viable future? More fundamentally, should miners be thought of as a collective or as an aggregation of individuals? And did their identity as miners override all other forms of identity, as husbands, fathers, citizens, consumers? Equally important, who was to decide who the coal miners really were – their union, their employer, journalists, politicians, scholars, or ordinary coal miners themselves? These are some of the questions that the articles in this special issue seek to address. In doing so, they make an important contribution to historicising the British miners and the coal industry, but also in opening up vistas for new understandings of contemporary British history more generally.

This introduction proceeds in three stages. It will, firstly, examine the media coverage surrounding the recent closure of Kellingley colliery in order to delineate the ‘structures of feeling’ surrounding coal mining and coal miners in contemporary British culture. The term is borrowed from the British Cultural Marxist Raymond Williams, who coined it in order to have available a heuristic device that would allow him to capture ‘meanings and values’ in their emotional and cognitive dimensions, diversity, inconsistency and open-endedness, and at the same time, to identify interrelating patterns and overarching structures. As Williams put it, ‘We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; affective elements of consciousness and relationships [...] with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension’.⁶ Second, the introduction will trace the origins of contemporary structures of feeling by locating them in the debates surrounding the miners’ strike of 1984/85. Contemporary structures, the introduction contends, derive from a selective appropriation of imaginaries that circulated at the time of the strike itself. Drawing on the work of Williams again, the introduction will reflect on how certain images and themes have become ‘hegemonic’ while others have become ‘residual’.⁷ Finally, the introduction will situate the individual contributions to this special issue in the context of recent scholarship on coal mining and consider their contribution to our understanding of contemporary British history more generally.

[Residual Proletarians: The Last Miners and the Popular Imagination](#)

The closure of Kellingley colliery on 18 December 2015 was a major media event. The final weeks of production at the pit were covered by all the national newspapers, which often ran in-depth features with titles such as ‘the end of the mine’, ‘Goodbye to the Big K’ or ‘Goodbye old King Coal’.⁸ On the day of the final shift, Channel 4’s flagship news programme featured the event as the main story of the day, while regional BBC’s *Look North* and ITV *news calendar* ran special reports.⁹ In a sign of the significance ascribed to the event, the BBC commissioned the documentary filmmaker Wes Pollitt to observe ‘the last miners’ in the weeks before the shut-down and during its aftermath. (The documentary was eventually aired on two evenings during prime time television on the first anniversary of the closure in November 2016.)¹⁰ The extent of the coverage was significant in itself. It requires explanation. After all, in purely economic and social terms, the shutdown of an industrial unit that employed no more than a few hundred men was hardly the stuff of headline news. Not so with Kellingley colliery.

As the reporting made clear, the closure derived its significance from what it symbolised rather than from the impact of the event itself. Indeed, as some miners commented bitterly, the closure attracted much more attention than previous attempts to keep the colliery in production.¹¹ The extensive coverage pointed to a disjuncture between cultural representation and socio-economic significance. Although once a major employer, the coal industry had played a negligible part only in the occupational structure of the UK for more than 20 years. Ever since the mid-1990s, there had been no more than a few thousand men working in the industry, down from close to 200,000 ten years previously and from 700,000 at the time of nationalisation in 1947.¹² But culturally, the figure of the coal miner had continued to resonate in the popular imagination. As an archetype, ‘the coal miner’ embodied everything that had been left behind, for better or worse, in the ‘de-industrial revolution’ that had been under way since the 1960s and which had accelerated since the 1980s: an identity defined by production rather than consumption; a prioritisation of collective bargaining power over individual competition; and a mode of social being characterised by communal bonds and muscular masculinity instead of individuation and gender alignment.¹³ What was played out in front of the audience with the closure of Kellingley, then, was the final passing of this ‘way of life’ and the ‘end of an era’ that, in truth, had come to an end almost a generation ago.

Indeed, one recurrent theme of the reporting was that, by the time of the closure, this mode of social being and consciousness had long become, not just traditional, but residual. The Kellingley miners were cast as residual proletarians, living in a world that belonged to the

past. The documentary, 'The Last Miners', characteristically opened with a ditty, the Northern Calypso, which was performed by shift overman, Kevin Rove, in front of his workmates (and the team of filmmakers) down the pit. The song acknowledged, however playfully, a set of stereotypes which were clearly drawn from a bygone era – miners as unabashed 'Northern bastards', whippet-loving, hard drinking and wife beating. Meanwhile, the voice-over introduced the workers as 'a rare breed of men' and 'unexpected band of brothers' whose 'hidden world' deep below the Yorkshire countryside the documentary set out to discover before it was to disappear.¹⁴ The invisibility of this world, the documentary appeared to suggest, did not derive from its spatial seclusion only, but also from its temporal remoteness from contemporary society. The miners were relics who were about to be propelled into the volatility of twenty-first-century life by the harsh rupture that the closure of their 'habitat' represented. This point was underlined by two miners who featured prominently in the documentary. Both Kevin Rowe and command supervisor Sheldon Griffin commented during the course of the documentary on how their occupation and attendant way of life had become anachronistic.¹⁵ The extent to which the self-images of the miners, as articulated in the documentary, appeared to fit, or were made to fit, broader societal templates about miners as both admirable and pitifully out of date was remarkable indeed.¹⁶

The broader societal reach, and political implications, of a perception of miners as residual can perhaps best be illustrated by a notorious exchange in the House of Commons on 1 July 2015 between veteran Labour MP Dennis Skinner and the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. When the octogenarian MP for Bolsover attacked Cameron for the government's failure to provide support for the ailing coal industry and referred to him as 'dodgy Dave', the Prime Minister retorted by exclaiming sarcastically, 'very good to see the Labour Party in full voice cheering on Jurassic Park'. While Cameron had referred to Skinner as a 'dinosaur' on a previous occasion, in this instance, the jibe clearly extended to the cause of coal mining with which Skinner had long been identified.¹⁷ The MP for Bolsover had worked in a coal mine for 22 years before he rose through the ranks of the NUM to enter the House of Commons as a Union-sponsored MP at the age of 38 in 1970. As Skinner made clear in his autobiography, he was very proud of coming from 'good working-class mining stock'.¹⁸ He relished his reputation as a hard-hitting and straight-talking Socialist who had never forgotten let alone betrayed his working-class roots. Skinner did not mind the moniker 'Beast of Bolsover' which had been conferred onto him by another Labour MP and by which he had come to be known.¹⁹ As the embodiment of the ethos and qualities with which miners had long been

identified and which were fading fast, Skinner, with some justification, could be said to be the 'last miner' in Parliament.

While the temporal disjuncture between the world of the miners and society at large formed the first constitutive element of a contemporary structure of feeling, there was, second, a strong emphasis on affect. Journalists and television presenters tended to strike a tone of high seriousness, of pathos mixed with a tinge of sadness, reaching back into the past to a time when 'coal was king' in order to emphasise the historic importance of the occasion. Several features used Edward Elgar's enigma variation IX, "Nimrod", a tune typically performed at funerals and memorial services, to underline the solemn nature of the occasion. Mineworkers, their Union representatives and other members of the local community, meanwhile, gave expression to a variety of emotions, ranging from pride to sadness to anger.

It was significant that the range of emotional states on display were turned into an object of the reporting itself. Indeed, there was almost as much attention paid to how those affected by the closure were coping emotionally as to the event itself. While this concern might be considered a feature of contemporary news coverage more generally, in the case of Kellingley it derived its special salience from the interplay between affect and muscular masculinity. 'You won't find a miner crying in public', as the NUM branch secretary, Keith Paulson, insisted, 'but in private I bet there have been tears shed'.²⁰ Another newspaper quoted Paulson as simply saying, 'Men don't cry', only to juxtapose this with a quotation directly contradicting the apodictic statement.²¹ Still other features carried images of miners emerging from the pit for the last time and covering their faces, suggesting that they were indeed shedding tears.²² In the documentary, too, men were shown to be fighting losing battles against their emotions on their last day of work, despite all the convivial banter and forced cheerfulness on display. As one worker on the final shift put it, 'When we go out of mine for the last time we'll just crack up mate'. With tears welling up in his eyes he added, 'See. You got me going now' and turned away.²³

The range of emotions did not just encompass expressions of sadness, however repressed. Rather, some newspaper reports suggested that the atmosphere among the 450 or so miners in the weeks leading up to closure had been 'toxic', a mixture of 'anger, grief and frustration'. In an opinion piece written for the *Morning Star*, the general secretary of the NUM, Chris Kitchen, went further still, speaking of 'betrayal', while another former NUM branch official insisted, 'Our industry was murdered'.²⁴ Yvette Cooper, the local Labour MP, also mobilised

the language of ‘betrayal’ and denounced the Conservative government for failing to grant the miners generous redundancy packages.²⁵

The language of ‘betrayal’ and ‘murder’ points to a third element of the contemporary structure of feeling: its politically-charged nature. After all, where there is a crime, there must be a perpetrator. The combination of pent-up anger, hurt pride and resentful defiance that characterised the atmosphere at Kellingley in the final weeks of its 50-year history can perhaps best be illustrated with the help of a number of images that were reprinted in the press and shared on social media in December 2015. The first illustration was a notice put up by management in the colliery’s locker room, reminding ‘employees [that] normal attendance and operations will be expected’ on 18 December, the last day of work. The matter-of-factness of the notice contrasted with the handwritten scrawl left by an anonymous writer: ‘Fuck off. We’ll go when we want’.²⁶ [Image one] *The Guardian’s* north of England editor used this incident to illustrate what she called the ‘toxic atmosphere as the pit prepares to shut down forever’.

While management had offered to celebrate the last day of work by laying on a buffet and bringing in a brass band, the miners rejected the offer. Instead, they decided to mark the end of their pit in their own way, by going on a march through the town of Knottingley, with ‘heads held high’, as Kitchen put it in his opinion piece.²⁷ The march was organised by two miners’ wives, Lisa Cheney and Kristen Sinclair, in order to show some ‘love and affection [...] to [the miners] for everything that they do’.²⁸ The route led from the town hall to the miners’ social club in order to underline the close links between workplace and community. According to newspaper and television reports, up to 3000 people from the town and from across other communities in South Yorkshire took part in the event, which resembled a cross between a funeral procession and a protest march: It was led by a solitary figure dressed up as the grim reaper, followed by a brass band playing popular tunes and miners holding up union banners [Images two and three]. This was a proud assertion of tradition and expression of community solidarity in the face of adversity. Here, too, the very modes of social protest and community mobilisation seemed both immediately recognisable and curiously out of date in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

What was remarkable about the march was how different temporalities appeared to become conjoined, with the recent past almost crowding out the present. The past in question was the 1984/85 miners’ strike. In a press photograph reproduced on the Daily Mail website alongside a report on the march, Yvette Cooper MP was depicted standing next to Anne Scargill, co-

founder of Women against Pit Closures and ex-wife of Arthur Scargill. Both women wore buttons reminiscent of those during the 1984/85 strike. This was a harmonious image of two women from different generations and from opposite ends of the Labour movement facing a common enemy, the Tory governments past and present.²⁹ Yet elsewhere on the march, the bitter internal schisms of 1984/85 were carried over into the present. Two ex-miners from nearby Goldthorpe, which had made international headlines on the day of Margaret Thatcher's funeral by burning the Lady in effigy, carried two hand-made banners, denouncing 'scabbing bastards' and 'Tory scabs' for their refusal to join in the 1984/85 strike. In a condensing of historical events typical of the processes of collective memory formation more generally, the banners implied that the Nottinghamshire-based breakaway Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM) had been active during the strike itself, rather than, as was the case, formed in its aftermath.³⁰ At the end of the march, the banners were ceremoniously set on fire.³¹ This was done not so much, it seemed, to bury past division, but to underline the charge of 'betrayal' and to cast blame on those who they considered responsible.

Popular culture, through bitter-sweet social realist dramas such as *Brassed Off* (1996), *The Full Monty* (1997) and *Billy Elliot* (2000), and feel-good movies such as *Pride* (2014), has come to re-centre the 1984/85 miners' strike from a bitter industrial dispute between capital, labour and the state, to a contest over community, identity and sexual politics.³² It has come to celebrate community resilience, transformation and individual liberation as the true legacy of the conflicts of the 1980s, thereby reconfiguring crushing defeats as resounding victories, as symbolised by the concluding scene of *Pride*, when a delegation of South Wales' miners joins metropolitan activists in the London Gay Pride Parade of 1985.³³

By contrast, in Knottingley in December 2015, the resentment, anger and internal divisions seemed as raw as ever. Here, as elsewhere across the former coalfields of England, Wales and the traditional labour heartlands more generally, political developments appeared to indicate that the lessons drawn from lived experience were, in part at least, very different from those that had been celebrated so evocatively in popular culture. Not the embrace of artistic creativity, multiculturalism and sexual liberation stood out, but a susceptibility to nationalist and xenophobic siren calls, clad in the language of national self-determination and the exhortation to 'take back control'. The town of Knottingley forms part of the constituency of Normanton, Pontefract & Castleford, which has been a safe Labour seat since its creation in 2010, as were the previously separate constituencies of Normanton and Pontefract & Castleford. Yet, in the 2010 general election, the far-right British National Party took 8.3 per

cent of the vote as opposed to 1.9 per cent nationwide.³⁴ In 2015, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) scored 21.3 per cent, beating the Conservative Party to third place.³⁵ In the European Union Referendum of 23 June 2016, the Leave vote in the metropolitan borough of Wakefield far surpassed the national average, with a share of 66.4 per cent.³⁶ While the white working class was not the only social demographic that voted for Leave, a recent analysis of aggregate data by Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath has found that support for Leave was most pronounced in areas that ‘tend to be more economically disadvantaged than average, where average levels of education are low and the local population is heavily white’.³⁷ Given these findings, it was probably no coincidence that propaganda for the ‘vote leave’ campaign featured prominently on the Kellingley Colliery Facebook appreciation site, whereas there were no contrasting messages urging viewers to support Remain.³⁸

As the analysis of the news coverage surrounding the closure of Kellingley has demonstrated, the figure of the coal miner tended to be cast as a ‘residual proletarian’ in the contemporary imagination, as a ‘dinosaur’ who embraced workplace attitudes, modes of sociability and states of consciousness that belonged to a bygone era and whose passing may be deplored, but, ultimately, must be accepted as inevitable. The temporal disjuncture between the world that the miner inhabited and society at large was one constitutive element of this structure of feeling, the strong emphasis on affect and the politicised nature were two others. Yet, as much as mineworkers, when speaking publicly, seemed to align their individual subjectivities to these broader structures, there appeared to have opened up a disjuncture between the political outlets of the underlying sense of grievance, on the one hand, and the broader culture representations, on the other. While feature films from *Billy Elliot* to *Pride* had embraced a forward-looking New Labour ethos that represented collective rupture as an opportunity for the individual, the public burning of banners at the Knottingley protest march, denouncing fellow (ex-)miners for actions that had taken place more than one generation ago, as well as the strong support demonstrated in former mining communities for Brexit, pointed to altogether different, and arguably much darker, departures that still await their cultural representation at the time of writing. Above all perhaps, the coverage surrounding the closure of the last deep-coal pit demonstrated the long shadow that the 1980s, and the miners’ strike of 1984/85 in particular, cast on contemporary articulations surrounding the figure of the coal miner and the coal industry.³⁹

Present Pasts: The Long Shadow of the 1984/85 Miners' Strike

Early twenty-first century memories of coal mining and miners in Britain were inseparable from the 1984/85 strike. To be more precise, they were inseparable from the way in which, in Raphael Samuel's words, the strike had come to be 'assimilated in popular memory, by the retrospective understanding both in the pit villages themselves and in the country at large'.⁴⁰ In this collective memory of the strike, two themes stood out. The first was the idea of the coal miner as a typical representative of a mode of production, societal organisation and cultural signification that, while not yet obsolete, was rapidly being consigned to history. The striking miners were cast as archetypal proletarians belonging to an industrial Britain that was receding fast. The second theme revolved around the idea of 'community', the anticipated 'death' in the wake of closures, but also of resilience, survival and transformation.⁴¹

In the strike, the narration went, the miners were up against forces that were much more powerful than themselves and which must inevitably overwhelm them in the end. In the politicised rendition of this tale, these forces were embodied by the Conservative government of the 1980s, and in particular, the person of the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. As the miner character 'Dai' put it in the feature film *Pride* when addressing a metropolitan audience in a gay bar in London, 'When you're in a battle against an enemy so much bigger, so much stronger than you, well, to find out you had a friend you never knew existed [...] that's the best feeling in the world.'⁴² In *Pride*, as elsewhere, Margaret Thatcher was cast in the role of offstage villain.⁴³ Yet, there was, at one and the same time, a pervasive sense that the Prime Minister, for all her vindictiveness, was no more than a handmaiden of much more fundamental currents of historical change, of tectonic shifts in the underlying socio-economic and socio-cultural structure of British society that were both unstoppable and largely impervious to political agency. 'Coal is History, Miss Mullins', as the manager told Gloria Mullins, the middle class professional who had returned to 'Grimley', the mining village of her childhood, to conduct a viability study of the local colliery, in the 1996 feature film *Brassed Off*. In this broader rendition, the 'enemy' of which Dai spoke was no other than History itself.⁴⁴

The notion that, even during the 1980s, the coal miner was fast becoming an anachronism has resonated powerfully in academic scholarship as well. In his landmark essay on 'British Manual Workers: From Producers to Consumers, c. 1950–2000', Avner Offer characterised the miners' strike of 1984/85 as 'the proletarians' last stand'.⁴⁵ The idea of a 'last stand' was

borrowed from military contexts, where, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), it was usually employed to denote ‘an act of determinedly holding or defending a position against a (more powerful) opposing force; a final show of resistance or protest’.⁴⁶ Tony Judt, in his history of post-war Europe, commented laconically that the miners’ cause in 1984/85 was ‘hopeless’.⁴⁷ Graham Stewart, in his popular history of 1980s Britain, provocatively claimed, ‘The Miners were the real conservatives’.⁴⁸

The second theme that dominated the collective memory of the 1984/85 strike revolved around the idea of ‘community’. It was a tale of resilience under adversity, but also of transformation. Here coal miners were presented as defenders of community values while the experience of the strike served as a catalyst for community transformation. This emphasis on resilience and transformation tied in powerfully with a broader reworking of ‘1984/85’ from an industrial conflict between capital and labour to a cultural conflict over identity. *The Guardian* headlined its 30th anniversary coverage of the strike with a quotation that captured this shift of emphasis succinctly. It read, ‘I fought not just for “my pit” but for the community.’⁴⁹ According to the OED, ‘community’ can denote both commonality and difference. The term was used to describe ‘a body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity’, but also connoted ‘a group of people [...] distinct from those of the society in which they live’.⁵⁰ More recently, the theme of transformation has tended to crowd out the earlier emphasis on defensive resilience. Here, too, the parameters of popular memory appear to furnish the framework within which contemporary scholarship operates.⁵¹

The dual narrative of miners as backward-looking ‘industrial proletarians’ engaged in a defensive ‘last stand’ and of ‘1984/85’ as a struggle over ‘community’ can be traced back to the time of the strike itself, as two strands in a much broader web of often conflicting significations. During the time of the strike, the two themes were invoked by both opponents and supporters of the miners’ cause. In an opinion piece published in *The Times*, for example, Alfred Sherman argued that the strikers represented ‘trammels on the further development of productive forces’ and stood in the way of ‘social as well as economic change’. In effect, they were being kept by their Union ‘in the equivalent of what Marx called “rural idiocy”’.⁵² In a similar vein, the writer Auberan Waugh commented sarcastically that ‘nowadays [...] mining villages are by definition warm, vibrant, caring, ecologically bio-efficient heritage material’. In reality, the opposite was the case, or so Waugh claimed. Mining communities were a

society in which ‘the loudest, coarsest and most violent man is king’; they represented ‘everything that is most brutal and vile in human nature’.⁵³

By contrast, the Welsh poet Duncan Bush depicted the strike as a moment of community rebirth in which the best coalfield traditions of perseverance and political endeavour, mutual help and solidarity had been revived. As he wrote in a poem called ‘Summer 1984’:

The weeks and months of strike saw
slowly and concurrently emerge in shabby
river-valleys in South Wales

- in Yorkshire too, and Durham,
Kent and Ayrshire – villages no longer
aggregates of dwellings

privatised by television, but
communities again, the rented videos and tapes
back in the shop.⁵⁴

In an influential intervention towards the end of the strike, Raphael Samuel too developed the theme of community renewal. In addition, he likened the striking miners to nineteenth century ‘village radicals’ in order to underline what he claimed to be the essentially defensive nature of their demands.⁵⁵

While there can be traced a lineage from the present to the mid-1980s (and further back into the past), it is important to recognise that early twenty-first century images represent a selective memory of the ideas and discourses that circulated at the time of the strike itself. Contemporary collective memory of coal was forged in the 1990s, by the cultural reworking of the figure of the miner in the wake of the coal crisis of 1992 and the privatisation of the industry that followed. With the end of the Cold War, the removal of Margaret Thatcher from power and the radical contraction of the coal industry since the end of the strike, the idea that the miner could ever have been an ‘enemy’ engaged in a ‘a small-scale revolutionary challenge’ (*The Times*) was starting to sound bizarre.⁵⁶ But alongside the disappearance of the idea of the miners as villains, there arguably also vanished the notion that miners could ever have been powerful agents in their own right. What was left was the dual notion of the miner as a victim of forces much stronger than himself; and of the strike as a transformative moment

for mining communities, either signifying their ‘death’, or conversely, ushering in transformation and renewal.

New approaches to the study of coal, community and identity

Given the dominance of ‘1984/85’ in popular memory, historical scholarship is faced with a challenge: It needs to acknowledge the significance of the strike for contemporary British history, both of the events themselves and the subsequent reworking in popular memory, and to challenge the myths that have crystallised around them. Yet at the same time, scholarship also needs to extricate itself from the strike’s stranglehold by recognising the limits of ‘1984/85’ for an understanding of coal miners, their industry and the course of British contemporary history more generally.⁵⁷ As the essays in this volume make clear, the aftermath of the closure of the last deep-coal mine is a good moment to start embarking on this endeavour. It is a good moment for historical scholarship to function as a corrective to popular memory rather than to operate within its parameters; to scrutinise, destabilise and contextualise – in a word, to historicise – the figure of the coal miner and the myths that surround him; and to interrogate critically and refine the central concepts that are customarily invoked in relation to the coal industry.

As Tim Strangleman demonstrates in his contribution, there has long existed a close relationship between the coal miners and the social sciences. In particular, mining communities have long been an object of particular interest to sociologists. Indeed, in the early post-war years, studies on pit communities helped to legitimise sociology as an academic discipline. As the article makes clear, many of the central categories with which historians, but also the wider public, operate have been put into circulation by sociologists. This holds true for the concept of an ‘occupational community’ and of mining as a ‘distinct way of life’ just as much as for the idea that miners represent ‘traditional’ workers. Problematically, there has also been a tendency on the part of historians to take ideal types in the Weberian tradition as empirically validated depictions of social being and social consciousness. In a conscious attempt to counter such lazy stereotyping, much of the scholarship conducted in the 1970s and 1980s sought to disaggregate mineworkers and reimagine them as ‘independent colliers’. At the same time, the industrial conflicts of the period gave rise to the scholar-as-activist who self-consciously took sides and professed to give a voice to ‘ordinary’ miners. Significantly, mining communities have retained their

prominent place in sociological scholarship even after the closure of the pits, and have become prominent sites to study the long-term effects of de-industrialisation.

Whereas Strangleman's contribution underlines the need for historians to take into account the ways in which central categories have been constructed by the social sciences, Jim Phillips' contribution demonstrates how the notion of 'community' can be turned from an affective category denoting a diffuse sense of social and geographical belonging into an analytical tool. To this end, Phillips distinguishes between three different meanings of community, as 'economic locality', 'ideological commonality' and 'occupational group', respectively. Doing so allows him to develop an argument which emphasises that the economic diversification of the 1960s served to strengthen local economies despite the contraction of the coal industry, whereas the de-industrialisation of the 1980s tended to have the opposite effect. Drawing attention to social class and gender as constitutive 'markers of social identity' in coalfield communities, Phillips argues that the industrial conflicts of the 1980s, while proving socially divisive in the short run, ultimately served to strengthen a sense of 'ideological communality' across geographical and gender divides. Likewise, the experience of redundancy, closures and job loss reinforced, rather than weakened, the idea of miners as an occupational group who shared many characteristics in common with other industrial workers.

While the contributions by Strangleman and Phillips are concerned with the history of coal in the *longue durée* since the 1950s, Martina Steber and co-authors Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson focus more specifically on the iconic strike of 1984/85. They confront head-on popular understandings about the nature of the conflict and its consequences. In an approach informed by conceptual history, Steber conceives of the dispute as a 'war of words', a conflict over the meaning and ownership of central terms in the political vocabulary of the British body politic. Far from marking the beginning of the end for Thatcherism, Steber argues, the strike facilitated Conservative hegemony in the discursive fields of 'the nation', 'society', 'the Cold War' and 'democracy'. Mastery in these fields strengthened further the Conservative claim to be the true representative of British values, sensibilities and modes of conduct and hence the 'natural' party of government. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson focus on a different aspect of the strike, but are no less iconoclastic in their revisionism. Drawing on recently released files of leading protagonists in the women's support movement as well as oral history interviews, they argue that the popular image of Women Against Pit Closures as a spontaneous grass-roots movement in the

coalfields does not stand up to empirical scrutiny. Indeed, the emphasis on ‘ordinariness’ that permeated the pamphlet literature must be understood as a conscious rhetorical strategy to obfuscate the long experience of central protagonists in political mobilisation, affiliations to the Communist Party and the extent of direction from above by the Union’s president, Arthur Scargill. The authors’ provocative findings will no doubt be intensely debated among feminist historians and contemporary historians more generally.

The two final contributions are concerned with the interrelated processes of heritage creation and identity formation. As Natasha Vall demonstrates in her comparative case study of the establishment of two prominent coal-mining heritage sites in the 1970s and 1980s, the changing fortunes of the coal industry mattered, as did different curatorial approaches. Beamish Open Air Museum was founded as a ‘hybrid’ between Continental European ‘folk’ museums and North American popular history museums. Established in 1971, it tended to present a sanitised version of the past. By contrast, Woodhorn Colliery Museum, founded in 1989, foregrounded the arduous working conditions below ground, the hardship suffered by mining communities and the industrial struggles waged by the trade unions. In the final contribution, Almuth Ebke considers the role of coal in the Britishness debate of the late 1990s and early 2000s. She traces the origins of this discourse to earlier concerns about the rise of Celtic nationalism and fears over the possible break-up of the United Kingdom. The role of coal was two-fold in this debate, she argues. On the one hand, the various problems in the industry contributed to declinist understandings of the course of British history, which formed an important backdrop to the debate. At the same time, the accelerated rundown of mining in the ‘peripheral’ coalfields of Scotland and Wales helped to revive Celtic nationalism.

Roy Mason, with whose quotation this introduction opened, had passed away before the arrival of the ‘day of the final closure gloriously’ (he died in the spring of 2015), but it is unlikely that he would have found much joy in the occasion. What distinguishes the history of the British coal industry from the history of other Western European countries is not the overall outcome (which was the same), but the depth of emotion, political controversy and meaning with which mining was invested. To many contemporaries, the fortunes of the industry symbolised much broader patterns of societal organisation and trajectories. The figure of the coal miner, meanwhile, conjured up many conflicting images: heroic and villainous, frightening and pitiful, special and ordinary. Therein lies the methodological

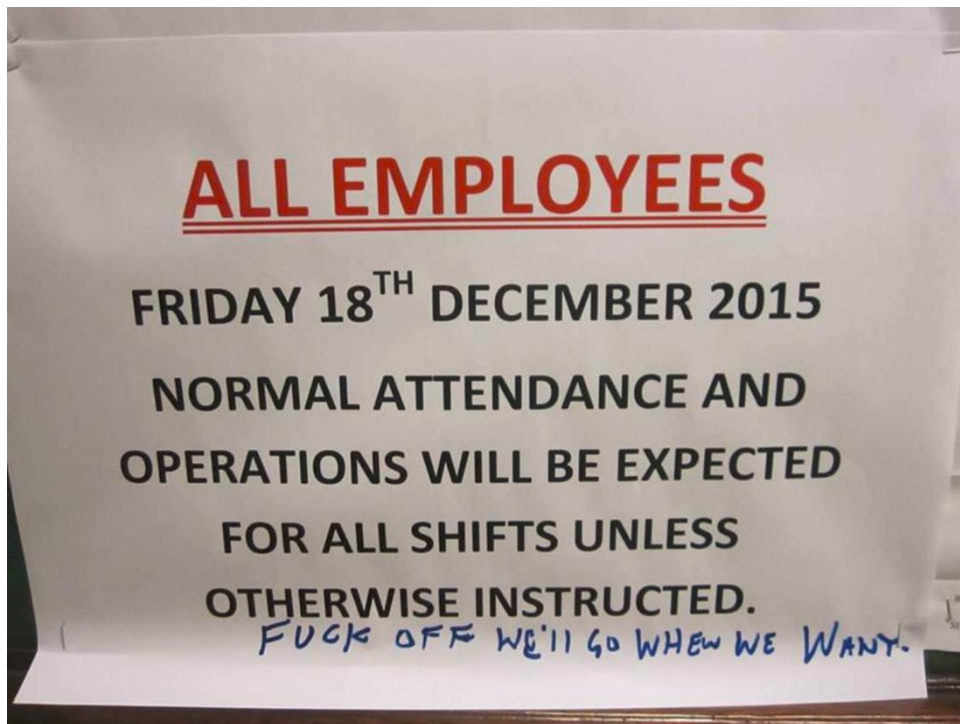
challenge but also the heuristic potential of the study of coal for contemporary British history. This potential extends far beyond the specialised fields of labour history and economic history, important as they are. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, the study of coal has an important contribution to make to current historiographical debates about new metanarratives for post-war British history, but also about the continued relevance, or otherwise, of older narrative arcs.⁵⁸

References

- Arnold, Jörg. *The Allied Air War and Urban Memory: The Legacy of Strategic Bombing in Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Arnold, Jörg. "Vom Verlierer zum Gewinner – und zurück. Der Coal Miner als Schlüsselfigur der britischen Zeitgeschichte." *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 42 (2016): 266-297.
- Ashworth, William. *The History of the British Coal Industry. Vol. 5: 1946-1982: The Nationalised Industry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.
- Black, Lawrence, and Hugh Pemberton. "Introduction: The benighted decade? Reassessing the 1970s." In *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, edited by Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane, 1-24. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013.
- Bush, Duncan. *Salt*. Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1985.
- Goodwin, Matthew J., and Oliver Heath. "The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-level Analysis of the Result." *The Political Quarterly* 87/3 (July-September 2016): 323-332.
- Harrison, Brian. *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom 1970-1990*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010.
- Hilton, Matthew, Chris Moores and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite. "New Times Revisited: Britain in the 1980s." *Contemporary British History* (2017): 1-21.
- Judt, Tony. *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*. London: Vintage, 2010 (1st ed. 2005).
- Kelliher, Diarmaid. "Constructing a Culture of Solidarity: London and the British Coalfields in the Long 1970s." *Antipode* 49/1 (2016): 106-124.
- Kelliher, Diarmaid. "Solidarity and Sexuality: Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners 1984-5." *History Workshop Journal* 77 (spring 2014): 240-262.
- Kitson, Michael, and Jonathan Michie. "The de-industrial revolution: the rise and fall of UK manufacturing." In *The Cambridge History of Modern Britain, Vol. II: 1870 to the Present*,

- edited by Roderick Floud, Jane Humphries and Paul Johnson, 302-329. Cambridge: CUP, 2014.
- Leeworthy, Daryl. "For our common cause: Sexuality and left politics in South Wales, 1967-1985." *Contemporary British History* 30/2 (2016): 260-280.
- "Modern British Studies at Birmingham Working Paper No. 1." February 2014, <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/history/mbs/MBS-Birmingham-Working-Paper-1.pdf>.
- Offer, Avner. "British Manual Workers: From Producers to Consumers, c. 1950-2000." *Contemporary British History* 22/4 (2008): 537-571.
- Robinson, Emily, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson. "Telling Stories about Post-war Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s." *Twentieth Century British History* (2017): 1-37.
- Samuel, Raphael. "Introduction." In *The Enemy Within: Pit villages and the miners' strike of 1984-5*, edited by Raphael Samuel, Barbara Bloomfield and Guy Boanas, 1-39. London: Routledge & Kegan, 1986.
- Samuel, Raphael. "Preface." In *The Enemy Within: Pit villages and the miners' strike of 1984-5*, edited by Raphael Samuel, Barbara Bloomfield and Guy Boanas, ix-xx. London: Routledge & Kegan, 1986.
- Skinner, Dennis. *Sailing Close to the Wind: Remnisciences*. London: Quercus, 2014.
- Stewart, Graham. *Bang! A History of Britain in the 1980s*. London: Atlantic, 2013.
- Taksa, Lucy. "Like a Bicycle, Forever Teetering Between Individualism and Collectivism: Considering Community in Relation to Labour History." *Labour History* 78 (May, 2000): 7-32.
- Tomlinson, Jim. "De-industrialization Not Decline: A New Meta-narrative for Post-war British History." *Twentieth Century British History* 27/1 (2016): 76-99.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford & New York: OUP, 1977.

Image one: Notice put up by management in the locker room of Kellingley colliery a few days before the closure, <https://www.facebook.com/Savekellingleycolliery/>.



Images two and three: *To be supplied after permission for reproduction has been granted.*

¹ This Special Issue grew out of an international conference on ‘the end of coal’ which was held at the University of Nottingham on 30 June – 1 July 2016. I gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support by the University’s International Conference Fund and the University’s Research Priority Area: British Identities, which made the conference possible. I am also very grateful to my colleagues Vicki Morris and Lisa McCabe with their help in organising the event. I thank all participants for their contributions and stimulating discussion. Finally, I would like to thank my colleague Dr Dean Blackburn for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this introduction.

² House of Commons Hansard, Sitting of 19th December 1973, col. 1381-91, here: 1390.

³ *Ibid.*, col. 1391.

⁴ Contraction of the post-World War II industry started with the coal crisis of 1957. For an overview of the history of the industry from 1946 to 1982 see vol. 5 of *The History of the British Coal Industry: Ashworth, Nationalised Industry*. The concluding volume of the series, taking the story up to 2002, is currently being written by Chris Wrigley (Nottingham). See also the AHRC-funded project, ‘On behalf of the people: work and community in the Nationalised British Coal Industry, 1947-1994’, by Keith Gildart (Wolverhampton) and Andrew Perchard (Coventry). See the description on the Research Councils UK gateway: <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH%2FP007244%2F1> (accessed 25 April 2017).

⁵ Helen Pidd, “‘Like being on death row’: the final week in Kellingley colliery.” *Guardian*, 17 December 2015.

⁶ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128-135, here: 132.

⁷ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 108-115.

-
- ⁸ Susanna Rustin, "The end of the mine." *Guardian*, 5 December 2015, 34f.; Martin Fletcher, "Goodbye to the Big K." *New Statesman*, 6-12 November 2015, 30-35; Lucy Thornton, "Goodbye old King Coal: Community heartbroken as Britain's last deep pit Kellingley closes." *The Mirror*, 18 December 2015, online edition (accessed 1 April 2017); see also Chris Tighe and Andrew Bounds, "End of an era: Former coal communities struggle to form future after sector's slow demise." *Financial Times Weekend*, 12/13 December 2015, 4.
- ⁹ ITN, Channel 4 News, episode 352, 18 December 2015. Accessible online via The British Universities and Colleges Film and Video Council. <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand>. See also BBC News at Six, 18 December 2015. The closure was also covered by the other news programmes throughout the day, but David Cameron's negotiations over Britain's future in the EU and a UN resolution on the civil war in Syria tended to take precedence. BBC's Look North, 18 December 2015; ITV news calendar, 18 December 2015.
- ¹⁰ *The Last Miners, episode one*, dir. Wes Pollitt, 21:00, 21 November 2016, BBC1 London, 60 mins. <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/ODE11C31> (accessed 26 Apr 2017)[subsequent references as *Last Miners, one*]; *The Last Miners, episode 2*, dir. Wes Pollitt, 21:00, 28 November 2016, BBC1 London, 60 mins. <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/ODE752D2> (accessed 26 Apr 2017) [subsequent references as *Last Miners, two*].
- ¹¹ On the attempts to save the colliery, and frustration with the media circus surrounding the final closure, see the Kellingley Colliery Appreciation Site, <https://www.facebook.com/Savekellingleycolliery> (accessed 31 March 2017).
- ¹² Ashworth, *Nationalised Industry*, 677-80 for employment figures for the period from 1947 up to 1982. For figures for the 1990s see Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 'Historical coal data: coal production, availability and consumption 1853 to 2015', <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/historical-coal-data-coal-production-availability-and-consumption-1853-to-2011>. The figures should be treated as a general indication only as the statistical basis for the years of 1981 to 1994 was much narrower than for subsequent years.
- ¹³ Kitson and Michie, "De-industrial Revolution", 318; Tomlinson, "De-industrialisation", 3, notes that industrial employment, inclusive of mining and construction, peaked in 1955, but it seems a moot point whether this really amounted to the onset of a 'de-industrial revolution' with all the economic, social and cultural connotations that the term carries..
- ¹⁴ *Last Miners, one*.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. See also Margaret Faull & Shaun McLoughlin, quoted in Rusin, "End of the Mine", 34.
- ¹⁶ In a perceptive review of the documentary, Gerard O'Donovan noted: "What definitely did not emerge, however, was an image of a modern, efficient industry that might have had a future, save for political interference". Gerard O'Donovan, "The Last Miners is a moving meditation on the fate of the Kellingley Colliery: review." *The Telegraph* (online edition), 21 November 2016.
- ¹⁷ House of Commons Hansard, Sitting of 1 July 2015, col. 1480.
- ¹⁸ Skinner, *Sailing*, 19.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 189.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Helen Pidd, "Like being on death row".
- ²¹ Thornton, "Goodbye old King Coal."
- ²² Katie Sands, " 'A nation of Starbucks and call centres' That's miner Carwyn Donovan's damning view of the UK after the demise of the coal industry." *walesonline.co.uk* (accessed on 1 April 2017). See also Emma Henderson, "Kellingley Colliery: Miners march in final farewell to last British deep coal mine." *The Independent*, 20 December 2015, online edition (accessed 01 April 2017). Here the miner sheds at tear at the memorial march rather than at the pithead itself.
- ²³ *Last miners, two*.
- ²⁴ Peter Lazenby, "Ex-miners mark the End of an Industry." *The Morning Star online*, 21 December 2015 (accessed 31 March 2016).
- ²⁵ Interview with Yvette Cooper MP, *BBC Look North*, 18 December 2015.
- ²⁶ Kellingley Colliery Appreciation Site, posted on 15 December 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/Savekellingleycolliery>.
- ²⁷ Chris Kitchen, "Our Mining Men were betrayed." *Morning Star*, 19 December 2015, online edition (accessed 03 April 2017).
- ²⁸ "Thousands join march to mark closure of UK's last deep coal mine." *Guardian*, 19 December 2015. See also Rustin, "end of the mine."

- ²⁹ Press Association, “Kellingley miners join “solidarity” march after last coal pit’s closure.” *Mail online*, 19 December 2015. See also the comments in Pidd, “Like being on death row.” It was a staple of the reporting on the closure to jump from the time when ‘coal was King’ in the early twentieth century to the time of the strike.
- ³⁰ I have written about the processes of memory formation elsewhere, and in a different context: see Arnold, *Allied Air War*, 21-68.
- ³¹ “Mining village ‘celebrates’ Margaret Thatcher’s funeral”, 17 April 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-22183736> (accessed 06 April 2017); Press Association, “Thousands join march to mark closure of UK’s last deep coal mine.” *Guardian*, 19 December 2015.
- ³² *Brassed Off*, dir. Mark Herman (1996); *The Full Monty*, dir. Peter Cataneo (1997); *Billy Elliot* (2000), dir. Stephen Daldry.
- ³³ *Pride*, dir. Matthew Warchus (2014).
- ³⁴ BBC, Election results 2010, Normanton, Pontefract & Castleford, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election2010/results/constituency/d10.stm> (accessed 26 April 2017).
- ³⁵ BBC, Election results 2015, Normanton, Pontefract & Castleford, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/E14000836> (accessed 26 April 2017).
- ³⁶ BBC, EU referendum: The result in maps and charts, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36616028> (accessed 30 March 2017).
- ³⁷ Goodwin and Heath, “The 2016 Referendum”, 325. For immediate journalistic responses to the Referendum result that develop a similar argument see, amongst others, Mike Carter, “My walk through the wasteland whose people voted leave.” *The Guardian*, 27 June 2016; Rob Ford, “The ‘left-behind’, white, older, socially conservative voters turned against a political class with values opposed to theirs on identity, EU and immigration.” *The Observer*, 26 June 2016, 14f.; Kevin McKenna, “ ‘The main reason I voted to leave was immigration ... We sent a message to the people in charge of this country that they need to listen to us.’ ” *The Observer*, 26 June 2016, 6 ; “We ignored the ‘left-behind’: That failure could still break Britain.” *The Observer*, 26 June 2016, 40. See also, “The New Times: Brexit, globalisation, the crisis in Labour and the future of the left. With essays by David Miliband, Paul Mason, John Harris, Lisa Nandy, Vince Cable and more.” *New Statesman*, 22 September 2016.
- ³⁸ The post has since been removed.
- ³⁹ To some extent, the coverage of the closure was shaped by current narrative conventions governing the genres of newspaper reportage and film documentaries just as much as by the sense of irredeemable rupture with the past and of an indiscernible future for the miners. These conventions were most noticeable in the BBC documentary, ‘The Last Miners’, which dramatized the events by focusing on the miners’ ‘battle’ to reach production targets in order for them to get their full redundancy pay. Here, the politically charged atmosphere that had featured so prominently in the reports of *The Guardian* and the *Morning Star* was present as a subtext only.
- ⁴⁰ Raphael Samuel, “‘The Enemy within’. Pit villages during the strike of 1984-5’ [leaflet], in Raphael Samuel Archive, Bishopsgate Institute, London, RS 4/250.
- ⁴¹ For a fuller discussion of the dominance that ‘1984/85’ exerts over the popular memory and historical scholarship see Arnold, “Vom Verlierer zum Gewinner.”
- ⁴² *Pride*, dir. Matthew Warchus (2014). The character of Dai was modelled on real-life Dai Donovan. See Kate Kellaway, “When miners and gay activists united: the real story of the film *Pride*.” *The Observer*, 31 August 2014, online edition (accessed 02 April 2017).
- ⁴³ Harrison, *Finding a Role*, 168.
- ⁴⁴ *Brassed Off* (1996), dir. Mark Herman. For an insightful documentary on the making of the film, including reflections on local responses, see *Movie Connections: Brassed Off*, 22:35, 22 October 2007, BBC1 London, 40 mins. <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/0072FDA3> (accessed 05 May 2017).
- ⁴⁵ Offer, “British Manual Workers,” 544.
- ⁴⁶ *OED* online, third edition (September 2014), entry, “last stand” (accessed 02 April 2017).
- ⁴⁷ Judt, *Postwar*, 542.
- ⁴⁸ Stewart, *Bang!*, 345.
- ⁴⁹ Caroline Bannock and *Guardian* readers, “Miners’ strike 30 years on: ‘I fought not just for “my pit” but for the community.” *Guardian*, 5 March 2015, online edition (accessed 3 April 2017).
- ⁵⁰ *OED* online, third edition (September 2009), entry, “community” (accessed 3 April 2017). For a critical evaluation of the use of the concept of ‘community’ in labour history see Taksa, “Like a Bicycle.”
- ⁵¹ Kelliher, “Solidarity and Sexuality”; Kelliher, “Constructing”; Leeworthy, “For our common cause”. See also the current oral history project on the theme of “Solidarity and the 1984-5 miners’ strike”,

<https://oralhistorynoticeboard.wordpress.com/2017/03/27/solidarity-and-the-1984-5-miners-strike-28-april-2017-london/>.

No judgement on the quality of this work is intended by pointing towards the broader cultural parameters within which it appears to be set.

⁵² Alfred Sherman, "How Scargill is betraying Marx." *The Times*, 21 August 1984, 10.

⁵³ Auberon Waugh, "A sense of community." *The Spectator*, 2 February 1985, 6. See also the contribution by Martina Steber in this volume.

⁵⁴ Duncan Bush, "Summer 1984", in: idem, *Salt*, 69f.

⁵⁵ Samuel, "Preface", xii; idem, "introduction", 22.

⁵⁶ "The Prism of Violence." *The Times*, 21 June 1984.

⁵⁷ There are parallels here with the challenges facing contemporary history more generally: see Hilton, Moores and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, "New Times Revisited", 4.

⁵⁸ Contributions to this debate include: Black and Pemberton, "Introduction"; Hilton, Moores and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, "New Times Revisited"; "Modern British Studies at Birmingham"; Robinson, Schofield, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Tomlinson, "Telling Stories"; Tomlinson, "De-industrialization".