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STEPHEN M. CULLEN

## The Fasces and the Saltire: The Failure of the British Union of Fascists in Scotland, 1932–1940

### ABSTRACT

The history of Britain's main manifestation of inter-war fascism, Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists [BUF], continues to be a hotly contested field of study. A new biography of Mosley, work on gender and the BUF, and the incorporation of new models of generic fascism have made important contributions to the historiography of the BUF. However, until recently, almost no historical consideration of the BUF's career in Scotland had been attempted. But work by Tony Milligan and Henry Maitles has opened up the topic of fascism in Scotland between the wars. This article seeks to build on these contributions, and examines two groups of factors that led to the failure of fascism in Scotland. The inability of the BUF to find political space in Scotland, allied to internal organisational weaknesses, compounded by the indifference of the English fascist movement to the BUF in Scotland created flaws that characterised the Scottish BUF from the outset. These weaknesses were exacerbated by the failure of the BUF to understand the Scottish dimensions of politics, such as the cross-cutting appeal of Scottish nationalism, and religious tensions. Finally, anti-fascist opposition proved to be especially problematic for the Scottish BUF.

The history of the British Union of Fascists [BUF] continues to attract a good deal of academic attention. In recent years, some notable new work has appeared on both the movement and its founder and leader, Sir Oswald Mosley. A new biography by Stephen Dorril appeared in 2006, with the declared aim of addressing what the author felt was the over-sympathetic picture of the fascist leader created by Robert Skidelsky's *Oswald Mosley*.<sup>1</sup> Richard Thurlow has continued his long-time work in the field, updating what is, in many respects, the standard text on the subject, *Fascism in Britain*, and incorporating new work into his recent *Fascism in Modern Britain*.<sup>2</sup> Younger historians have tackled

<sup>1</sup> S. Dorril, *Blackshirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London, 2006); R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918–1985* (Oxford, 1987); his updated text is, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London, 1998); R. C. Thurlow, *Fascism in Modern Britain* (Stroud, 2000).

other aspects of the British fascist experience, with Julie Gottlieb, building on earlier work by Martin Durham, proving to be a prolific scholar of women, gender and the BUF.<sup>3</sup> David Renton stands out for his Marxist critique of both the history and the historiography of the BUF, being particularly critical of some historians whom he feels are too 'liberal', or 'revisionist' in their work on the fascist movement.<sup>4</sup> In many respects, Renton tilts at windmills in his criticisms of other historians of British fascism; among those 'liberal' historians, some, like Philip Coupland, have opened up important new areas of study. Coupland's work on utopianism and British fascism, for example, is fascinating, as is his contribution on BUF ideology.<sup>5</sup> In the wider context of fascist studies, Roger Griffin's ground-breaking *The Nature of Fascism* introduced a new approach to the concept of generic fascism, focusing on the ideology of fascism which, he has argued, consists of a 'palingenetic' mythic core of ultra-nationalism, a view that he has most notably explored in his wide-ranging reader of fascist ideology, *Fascism*.<sup>6</sup> Griffin's approach has been followed by others, especially by Roger Eatwell.<sup>7</sup>

The continuing activity in the field of British fascism has, however, until relatively recently, had one blind spot, that of fascism in the 'Celtic' areas of Britain. S. M. Cullen's article and paper on the BUF in south Wales and Scotland were, for some time, the main work on this topic.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> J. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism* (London, 2000). Gottlieb's recent articles on this area of fascist studies include 'Female Fanatics; women's sphere in the British Union of Fascists', in M. Powers and P. Bacchetta (eds), *Right Wing Women; from Conservatives to Extremists Around the World* (New York, 2000), 29–42; "'Motherly Hate"; gendering anti-semitism in the British Union of Fascists', *Gender and History* 14 (2002), 294–320. For Martin Durham's main contribution on the topic of women in the BUF, see M. Durham, *Women and Fascism* (London, 1998). See also S. M. Cullen, 'Four women for Mosley: women in the British Union of Fascism, 1932–40', *Oral History* 24 (1996) 49–59.

<sup>4</sup> David Renton has cast his net wide in his critique of those historians who, like Andrew Mitchell (his major work is, 'Fascism in East Anglia', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Sheffield, 1999)), Philip M. Coupland, and Stephen M. Cullen, whom he feels have been too eager to utilise sources, such as interviews with former fascists, that are, in his view, tainted. See D. Renton, *Fascism in Theory and Practice* (London, 1999), 3–4, and D. Renton, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s* (London, 2000), 8–10.

<sup>5</sup> P. M. Coupland, 'The Blackshirted Utopians', *Journal of Contemporary History* 33 (1998) 255–72; P. M. Coupland, "'Left-Wing Fascism" in Theory and Practice; the case of the British Union of Fascists', *Twentieth Century British History* 13 (2002) 38–61. Coupland has also written on the local history of the BUF in Northamptonshire in, for example, 'The Blackshirts in Northampton, 1933–1940', *Northamptonshire Past and Present* 53 (2000) 71–82. Another of Renton's 'liberals' is S. M. Cullen, whose 'The Development of the Ideas and Policy of the British Union of Fascists, 1932–40', *Journal of Contemporary History* 22 (1987), 115–36 and 'Political Violence; the case of the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History* 28 (1993), 245–67, are still important contributions on both aspects of the BUF.

<sup>6</sup> R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London, 1991); R. Griffin, *Fascism* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> R. Eatwell, *Fascism: A History* (London, 1995), and, R. Eatwell, 'On defining the Fascist Minimum; the centrality of ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1 (1996) 303–20.

<sup>8</sup> S. M. Cullen, 'Another Nationalism; the British Union of Fascists in Glamorgan, 1932–40', *Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru/ Welsh History Review* 17 (1994) 101–14; and

Although the main texts all make passing mention of certain aspects of the BUF in Scotland, for a long time the only clear focus on the movement in Scotland was to be found in Kibblewhite and Rigby's anti-fascist monograph on the movement in Aberdeen.<sup>9</sup> However, more recently, Tony Milligan and Henry Maitles have added more to this neglected area. Milligan's article on BUF policy in relation to Scotland looked at some of the background to the formation of the BUF, and attempted an examination of some of the issues that led to the failure of the movement in Scotland.<sup>10</sup> This was an important contribution as, until then, assessments of the ultimate failure of the BUF had excluded any consideration of the particular conditions prevailing in Scotland, conditions that were, as Milligan suggested, different in certain key respects from those in the rest of Britain.<sup>11</sup> In Scotland, argued Milligan, even more so than in England, there was no political space left for the BUF by the 1930s. However, the focus of Milligan's article is narrow, and in such a short article it was only possible to scratch the surface of the topic. Henry Maitles has published more widely on the BUF in Scotland, with his most accessible work being a short note in the *Scottish Historical Review*.<sup>12</sup> Maitles' note is built upon a very small number of interviews with pre-war anti-fascists, along with some press evidence. The use of vital oral history sources is of great value, and enabled Maitles' to support his central contention, that anti-fascist opposition, often violent in nature, was a key explanatory factor in the BUF's failure in Scotland. Nonetheless, Maitles' did not draw upon any of the documentary evidence held at either the National Archives of Scotland [NAS] or The National Archives of the United Kingdom [TNA], which provide important additional insights into the activities, and failure, of the movement in Scotland.

The aim of this article is to build upon the ground-breaking work of Milligan and Maitles, and, using a wide range of sources – police, Special Branch, and MI5 documents held at the NAS and TNA, Scottish national and local press accounts, fascist printed materials, oral history sources, and other material, such as Labour Party reports – to provide the clearest picture yet of the strengths and weaknesses of the BUF in Scotland, and to offer conclusions as to the causes of the BUF's failure to establish itself in any permanent form, some localised and temporary

<sup>8</sup> (Continued) S. M. Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists in Scotland', *Proceedings of the Association of Scottish Historical Studies, Nationalism and Identity: the search for Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> L. Kibblewhite and A. Rigby, *Fascism in Aberdeen: Street Politics in the 1930s* (Aberdeen, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> T. Milligan, 'The British Union of Fascists' policy in relation to Scotland', *Scottish Economic and Social History* 19 (1999) 1–17.

<sup>11</sup> The essays in M. Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism* (Basingstoke, 1996), despite its title, devote no space to Scotland.

<sup>12</sup> H. Maitles, 'Blackshirts Across the Border; the British Union of Fascists in Scotland', *Scottish Historical Review [SHR]* 82 (2003) 92–9. See also, H. Maitles, 'Confronting Fascism; attitudes of the Glasgow Jewish community in the 1930s', *Local Historian* 27 (1997) 106–17.

successes notwithstanding. The history of the BUF in Scotland is also placed here in the context of some wider historiographical issues that have recently arisen concerning the fascist movement, including that of the relationship of women to the BUF.

### *Overview*

The BUF faced two distinct groups of problems in its attempt to establish fascism in Scotland. Ironically, for a fascist movement, the BUF had difficulty in recruiting competent local leaders. This was a problem that the Scottish fascists shared with their English and Welsh counterparts, but one that was compounded in Scotland by other difficulties, such as the indifference and occasional hostility of the national BUF leadership, based in London, to the cause of fascism in Scotland. The BUF branches in Scotland received less financial support than those south of the border, and only rarely had the benefit of meetings addressed by well-known national fascist figures, such as Mosley or William Joyce. In part, the isolation of the Scottish fascists within the BUF was due to the perception in London that the Scottish BUF was not making sufficient impact. But there was little recognition that the Scottish political landscape was, in important respects, quite different from England's, at least, for a new political movement like the BUF. These latter problems, which were external to the BUF's organisation, are interesting in that they suggest that there were significant differences faced by an activist movement like the BUF in attempting to make an impact on Scottish politics.<sup>13</sup> They also suggest why Scotland seems to have been largely impervious to the fascist message that was, from time to time, a notable part of the political and social cultures of certain areas of England; for example in the East End of London in the later 1930s or in East Anglia during the Tithe Wars.<sup>14</sup>

The BUF was undoubtedly handicapped by its failure to develop fully its policy towards Scotland. To a degree, this was a surprising omission as the BUF was an extremely programmatic fascist party, and produced a stream of policy statements on every conceivable aspect of political, economic and social life. However, the BUF, like most other

<sup>13</sup> Milligan suggested that the key difference lay in Scottish nationalist sentiment. This analysis contrasts with Maitles' view that active, and sometimes violent, anti-fascist opposition was the key variable in the failure of the BUF in Scotland. It is argued here that both elements had a role to play, but they are not the only explanatory variables. Indeed, if anti-fascist opposition is regarded as the key element, then the success of the BUF in the East End of London would be hard to explain. Indeed, it may be that the cycle of fascist and anti-fascist conflict, especially in the arena of street politics, was a primary factor in the localised success of the BUF in areas of the East End of London.

<sup>14</sup> The standard work on the BUF in the former area is T. P. Linehan, *East London for Mosley: the British Union of Fascists in East London and South-West Essex, 1933–40* (London, 1996); Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia'.

fascist parties, believed in the values of hierarchy and centralisation, both as a movement, and in their blueprint for a fascist Britain. Mosley himself made a number of vague statements concerning administrative devolution for Scotland in a future fascist Britain, perhaps in the form of a fascistised Scottish Office, but the details were not spelt out in any concrete fashion. This failure to develop its Scottish policy led to ruptures within the BUF in Scotland, and, in Edinburgh, at least, meant that the BUF found itself in direct competition with the nascent Scottish nationalist movement. The BUF made an even greater blunder in its failure to attach itself to either side of the religious divide in Scotland. The complexities of religious politics, especially religious street politics, was a primary cause of the failure of the BUF in Scotland, and it appears that older traditions of intolerance, in a sense, an older authoritarian tradition, helped defeat the new authoritarianism of the BUF. In this sense, Milligan is correct to say that there was no space in Scotland for the BUF.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the BUF was unable to establish dominance over the much smaller stage of fascist politics in Scotland, something that it effectively managed to do in England, absorbing much of the British Fascists [BF] in 1932, and eclipsing the nazi Imperial Fascist League [IFL] of Arnold Leese, and William Joyce's breakaway nazi group, the National Socialist League [NSL]. In Scotland, by contrast, a comparatively large number of small fascist parties and groups helped muddy the waters for the BUF by advocating various forms of fascism based on Scottish national sentiment and religious issues. Here one might detect the protestant disease of schism, with upwards of ten fascist groups in existence at various times in Scotland in the 1930s, all resisting BUF orthodoxy, with its spiritual centre in Mussolini's Rome. Finally, the BUF faced a good deal of violent opposition, in which the main players were, as in England, the Communist Party of Great Britain [CPGB], the National Unemployed Workers Movement [NUWM], and the Independent Labour Party [ILP], to which can be added smaller anti-fascist groups such as the Glasgow Workers' Circle.<sup>16</sup>

The BUF in Scotland was caught in a double bind, formed partly by its own internal weaknesses, and its failure to obtain support from the stronger English movement, and, more importantly, by issues revolving around an emerging Scottish political nationalism, religious cleavages in Scottish society, rival fascisms, and anti-fascism, including violent opposition. These two groups of problems, internal and external to the Scottish BUF as an organisation, form the framework of this article, but, first, it is necessary to review the pattern of BUF activity in Scotland.

<sup>15</sup> Milligan, 'The British Union of Fascists' policy in relation to Scotland', 12.

<sup>16</sup> Maitles has drawn attention to the importance of this largely Jewish workers' organisation in confronting fascism on the streets, see 'Blackshirts Across the Border', 95.

*The Pattern of BUF Activity in Scotland, 1932–40*

Individual fascists and branches made great efforts on behalf of their movement, and the BUF flourished briefly in various areas of the country, but it is the intention here to merely set the scene by providing an outline of BUF activity. Dumfries, Dalbeattie, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Perth all saw their share of fascist activity at different times throughout the period. However, much of this activity was slow in coming and was often of a temporary nature. This was despite Sir Oswald Mosley's earlier contacts in Scotland, both as a Labour Party MP, and as leader of the pre-fascist New Party (NP). During his years in the Labour Party, Mosley was associated with the radical wing of the Labour movement, in particular with several Clydeside MPs. Mosley's economic prescriptions for dealing with capitalism in crisis, as propounded in his famous 'Mosley Manifesto', written while he was still in the Labour Party, and in his fascist, *The Greater Britain*, were similar in many respects to the pre-Marxist ideas of James Maxton.<sup>17</sup> Equally, Mosley's close Labour colleague, John Wheatley, who was to die before Mosley's move to fascism, shared much of Mosley's analysis of the slump.<sup>18</sup> These strong Scottish connections were partly maintained following the creation of the New Party in February 1931, with two of its MPs coming from Scotland. Yet the NP failed badly in Scotland, as elsewhere, in the October 1931 general election, and the resulting Mosleyite movement, the BUF, made a weak start in Scotland after its birth in October 1932.

Police and Special Branch files held at TNA give a patchy picture of the pattern of BUF activity in Scotland. Nonetheless, they do reveal the broad outline of the overall history of the movement in Scotland, in addition to providing corroborating evidence for press, including the fascist press, reporting on key areas of BUF activity. It is clear that the BUF was slow to get off the ground in Scotland, with little real activity in the year 1932–3. It was not until late in 1933, for instance, that the movement had established a branch in Edinburgh. A Special Branch summary of April 1934, for the Home Office, of all BUF activity in Britain indicated that at a time when the BUF had 120 branches in England and Wales, with nine regional and area headquarters, Scotland only had a temporary national headquarters, under Richard Adolph Plathen, who was at that time seconded to Scotland.<sup>19</sup> In addition, at least one branch was existence in Edinburgh, under H. Duff, and Miss Maire Inglis, while a Dalbeattie branch was operating, led by James Little.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, 1934 proved to be a period of comparatively rapid growth for the BUF in Scotland. By September, the Special Branch were

<sup>17</sup> O. Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London, 1932); W. Knox, *James Maxton* (Manchester, 1987), 81.

<sup>18</sup> D. Howell, *A Lost Left: Three Studies in Socialism and Nationalism* (Manchester, 1986), 268–9; I. Wood, *John Wheatley* (Manchester, 1990), 158–9.

<sup>19</sup> London, The National Archives of the United Kingdom; Public Record Office [TNA: PRO], HO 144/ 674. 216/46.

<sup>20</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/ 674. 216/46.



reporting that there were around 400 BUF members in Dumfriesshire, noting:

A fairly large percentage of the members are described as 'passive' members, mostly 'business men, mostly in a small way'. This branch is regarded as one of the most flourishing in Scotland.<sup>21</sup>

*The Blackshirt* had been carrying small notices about the Dalbeattie branch since early in 1934, around the time when the fascist paper also noted that BUF activity had begun in Glasgow.<sup>22</sup> As the year progressed, so the fascist press carried more news about activity in Scotland: with branches being established in Motherwell,<sup>23</sup> and Glasgow,<sup>24</sup> the creation of an Edinburgh youth section (still, at this time, called 'Greyshirts');<sup>25</sup> the progress of a BUF 'agricultural [propaganda] van' in Kilbirrie;<sup>26</sup> the publication, in March of the booklet, *Fascism and Scotland*;<sup>27</sup> the first BUF meeting in Greenock, in September;<sup>28</sup> and increasing incidences of violence at the BUF's meeting, such as that at the Mound in Edinburgh in February,<sup>29</sup> and in Glasgow throughout September and into November.<sup>30</sup> By the end of the year the BUF had even extended its activities into the Highlands, with a meeting at Kingussie, in which fascist agricultural policy was explained.<sup>31</sup> This pattern of activism is borne out by the police and Special Branch reports throughout 1934, which noted BUF activity in Dundee, Lanarkshire, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dumfriesshire, Edinburgh, Renfrewshire, Perth, Paisley, Motherwell, Greenock, Kingussie, and the establishment of a second Edinburgh branch – West Edinburgh – in June. By the end of the year, the BUF had at the very least 800 members in Scotland, with a likely figure being around 1000 members. The two Edinburgh branches appear to have had approximately 160 members, there may have been close to 120 in Glasgow,<sup>32</sup> with 400 in Dalbeattie and 120 in Dumfries. If allowance is made for other known branches, in addition to individual, isolated, fascists, then the figure of approximately 1000 has something to recommend it. To put this in a comparative context, the BUF's

<sup>21</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/674 216/202, Appendix II. This report for the Home Office was a review of the BUF throughout Britain in August/September 1934, and argued that the movement had 'lost momentum', and was suffering from a lack of funds, and internal problems. Ironically, 1934 was a relatively good year for the Scottish BUF, so not for the first time it was out of step with the rest of the movement.

<sup>22</sup> *The Blackshirt*, 16–22 Feb. 1934; 23–29 Mar. 1934.

<sup>23</sup> *The Blackshirt*, 12–18 Jan. 1934.

<sup>24</sup> *The Blackshirt*, 13–19 Mar. 1934.

<sup>25</sup> *The Blackshirt*, 12–18 Jan. 1934.

<sup>26</sup> *The Blackshirt*, 7 Sep. 1934. The same issue also reported on John Beckett's speech to the Dumfries BUF.

<sup>27</sup> *The Blackshirt*, March 13–19, 1934.

<sup>28</sup> *The Blackshirt*, September 21, 1934.

<sup>29</sup> *Fascist Week*, February 23–March 1, 1934.

<sup>30</sup> *The Blackshirt*, September 7, 14, 21, and November 2, 1934.

<sup>31</sup> *The Blackshirt*, December 14, 1934.

<sup>32</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/674, 216/273, figures for Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Scottish membership figure in 1934 was around double that of the Scottish Party [SP], but a good deal less than the approximately 5000 members of the National Party of Scotland [NPS].<sup>33</sup> But for the BUF, 800–1000 members represented the high water mark of the movement in Scotland, whereas the Scottish nationalists were to continue to grow.

Although 1935 started with a short speaking tour of Scotland by William Joyce, the movement seemed unable to sustain the previous year's level of activity. Matters were made worse when, in March 1935, all paid BUF staff in Scotland were dismissed, saving the movement £500 a year, but, perhaps, fatally undermining any hope of further progress by the fascists in Scotland<sup>34</sup>. Around the same time, the Special Branch also reported that the Glasgow BUF branch was 'on the downward grade', membership having fallen by half from the previous October, to around 60 members; while the BUF in Edinburgh's two branches could only muster around 80 members, another fall of around half from October 1934.<sup>35</sup> This fairly rapid decline led Special Branch to conclude:

There has been serious trouble in the Scotland area, where membership has greatly declined, and there has been talk at [London] headquarters of refusing to send financial aid to branches in Scotland.<sup>36</sup>

This picture of decline in 1935 seems to be corroborated by the lack of coverage, compared with that of 1934, of Scottish fascists' efforts by the London based BUF press. Some new areas of activity were noted by the fascist papers, with a Leith branch being claimed in April, and activity in Midlothian in the same month, but, beyond some mention of anti-BUF violence in Edinburgh in August and November, little else was reported. The year 1935, then, appears to have been a year of decline for the BUF in Scotland, as it was for the rest of the movement. However, whereas the wider movement recovered from the nadir of 1935, the Scottish fascists were unable to emulate their English comrades.

Some retrenchment was achieved in 1936, but the Scottish BUF became dependent on the vitality of a number of key figures, local leaders who strove to offset the problems that the movement faced. In January 1936, Richard Plathen was made the permanent national organiser in Scotland, but the reorganisation that accompanied his appointment was unable to stem the decline in Scotland. Activity subsequently focused on some dedicated local leaders, such as George Budge in Perth, and W.K.A.J. Chambers-Hunter in Aberdeen.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Finlay, *Independent and Free: Scottish Politics and the origins of the Scottish National Party, 1918–1945* (Edinburgh, 1994), 156–7, gives these figures for the two nationalist parties, noting that the NPS's claim of 14,000 members in 1934, was an 'exaggerated roll'.

<sup>34</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/674, 216/273.

<sup>35</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/674, 216/270. Appendix A of a Special Branch report of February, 1935.

<sup>36</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/674, 216/270, February, 1935.

Both these local leaders, and their supporters, faced determined, and often very violent, opposition from anti-fascists, but it was only the dedication of such BUF activists that kept the BUF alive in Scotland. When these local leaders faded from the picture, the movement shrank to a position where, by 1939, it was almost moribund in Scotland.

*Local Leaders and Activists in Scotland – Blackshirt Men and Women*

As a latecomer to the political scene, the BUF was unable to take advantage of pre-existing social, industrial, or religious networks that provided the foundation of support for other political groups. In consequence, the BUF had to rely heavily on local leadership if it was to have any chance of establishing itself in the political landscape of Scotland. Conversely, the failure to attract sufficient leaders of quality proved to be a weakness for the movement, not only in Scotland, but throughout Britain. This was a problem faced by other new political groupings without a base or a possible entrée into existing networks. For whereas the CPGB was able to partially establish itself within the trades union movement, the Scottish nationalist movement, like Plaid Cymru in Wales, and the BUF, had no natural home. As a result, the Scottish nationalists were also reliant on good local leaders. The writer and nationalist, Neil M. Gunn, identified the importance of this factor to the Scottish nationalist movement in the early 1930s. During the negotiations between the NPS and the Scottish Party SP Gunn stressed the vital need for effective local leaders to present the nationalists' programme.<sup>37</sup> But, at least, the Scottish nationalists were able to tap into an emerging political culture of nationalism, something that the BUF was unable to do.

The most successful BUF leader in Scotland was James Little of Dalbeattie. Little was an example of the type of local leader that the BUF desperately needed, but rarely found. Under Little's leadership, the Dalbeattie branch of the BUF became, during 1934, the largest and most active BUF branch in Scotland, being several hundred strong.<sup>38</sup> By the summer of 1934, Little's importance to the BUF was recognised, and he was promoted to Officer-in-Charge, Scotland, making the Dalbeattie branch headquarters the national headquarters for the whole of Scotland. What is interesting about Little's success is that it seems to have rested, at least in part, on his position in Dalbeattie society. In addition to being the BUF leader, he was a bank manager, Town

<sup>37</sup> Neil Gunn, in a letter, dated 8 January 1933, on behalf of the NPS to Andrew Dewar Gibb (lecturer in Scottish law at Cambridge University, and a leading member of the SP), in J. B. Pick (ed.), *Neil M. Gunn: selected letters* (Edinburgh, 1987), 25.

<sup>38</sup> 'Report on replies to Fascist Questionnaire', Labour Party, LP/Fas 34/1; *The Blackshirt*, 7 Jun. 1934. Also the Special Branch [SB] report covering the period August–September 1934, which gives over 400 BUF members for the county, TNA: PRO, HO 144/20142/202, 674, 216/202. The material held in the extensive collection of HO files, in the HO 144 classification, forms the basis of much of the narrative for this article.

Clerk, and a well-known and respected figure in the social life of the town. The breadth of Little's involvement in Dalbeattie life may well have lain at the heart of his success as a local fascist leader. In his study of working-class leadership in Wales, Peter Stead identified such a breadth of involvement in community life as being essential to the success of the early Labour Party in south Wales. In contrast, narrowly sectional figures were rarely able to make headway as political leaders in a situation that was analogous, in certain respects, to that faced by the BUF<sup>39</sup>.

Little work has been undertaken on the social and occupational background of BUF activists in Scotland, but what is known points to this group having a clear professional, military and middle-class bias. The national organiser for Scotland, Richard Plathen had a background in the Consular Service, and, in 1939, seems to have taken up a business career connected with Empire trade.<sup>40</sup> Another example of an activist was 'CB', a member of the West Edinburgh branch. He was born in 1910, came from a military family, was educated privately in India, joined the BUF in 1936, and following internment in 1940, and five years service as an officer in the Royal Artillery, had a successful career in Scottish journalism. His closest friend in the Edinburgh BUF was an Old Etonian advocate from 'a well-known Scottish family', who was killed at the second battle of El Alamein.<sup>41</sup> Another BUF activist, from the Black Isle, served in the Royal Navy until 1936, joined the BUF, but then travelled to Spain to fight for Franco's nationalists, eventually being commissioned into the *Regulares*, the Moroccan troops fighting with the insurgents, before re-joining the BUF in London in 1939.<sup>42</sup> These snap shots of BUF activists in Scotland seem to indicate that the movement appealed to a certain type of man from the Scottish 'officer class'.

The BUF always portrayed itself as a 'modern movement', one in which politics and public service was seen as a duty, something that their style of political activity attempted to reflect. Further, the BUF also sought to create 'new Fascist men' (and women), who would be characterised, in part, by their devotion to the fascist cause, a devotion that would be evidenced by their activism. Local leaders were expected to initiate a constant stream of fascist activities, especially street meetings, indoor rallies, paper sales, and the support of area and national events. A number of local leaders in Scotland were notable in

<sup>39</sup> P. Stead, 'Welsh Working-Class Leadership in South Wales, 1900-1920', *Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru/The Welsh History Review* 6 (1972-3) 343-53.

<sup>40</sup> The Bellamy manuscript, held at the University of Sheffield, gives brief details of Plathen's background, see p.319, R. R. Bellamy, unpublished MS, *We Marched With Mosley*; while the late John Christian, of the Mosleyite organisation, 'Friends of Oswald Mosley', provided subsequent career details, in a letter to the author, dated, 11 Aug. 1992.

<sup>41</sup> Details of CB and his friend, courtesy of CB's family, in letters to the author, 1992.

<sup>42</sup> Information provided by a former Fife BUF member, in a letter to the author, June 1992.

this respect, and appear, on the strength of constant activity, to have boosted the support of the BUF.

In Aberdeen, a small group of activists under W K A J Chambers-Hunter brought the BUF to prominence in the city during 1937 and 1938. Despite, or perhaps because of, fierce anti-fascist opposition, Chambers-Hunter and his fascists made the Aberdeen branch the BUF's top newspaper-selling branch in Britain during the last quarter of 1936. Chambers-Hunter's efforts were also recognised by the movement when he was presented, by Mosley himself, with the BUF's Gold Award at a ceremony in Aberdeen's Caledonian Hotel in November 1937, which was attended by 100 guests. The vital role of the hyper-active Chambers-Hunter was confirmed in 1939 when the Aberdeen branch went into decline following his resignation from the BUF amid complaints about the over-centralism of BUF policy, and his desire to pursue his interest in social credit<sup>43</sup>.

The BUF's belief in the value of leadership, and its necessary reliance on local leaders to create a niche for the movement at the local level, proved to be more of a weakness than a strength. For not only did the movement fail to find enough leaders with either the social attributes of Little, or the character of Chambers-Hunter, but it was forced to promote good leaders, thereby denying the grass-roots movement of an essential element in its survival. A case in point is provided by John Hone, an engineer who had worked in South Africa, where he first became interested in fascism. On his return to Scotland, he joined the BUF in Dumfries in January 1934, and he quickly rose to the rank of officer-in-charge. Like Chambers-Hunter, Hone was a committed activist, and he helped boost the movement both in Dumfries, and, with Little in Dalbeattie, in the south-west of Scotland. However, his success led to continued promotion, and he became Northern [England] Inspecting Officer in 1935, thereby depriving the Dumfries branch of its main motor of success.

One other aspect of the BUF's local leadership in Scotland needs to be noted, that is the fairly high proportion of women who played important leadership roles. Formally, the BUF was organised into separate men's and women's hierarchies. However, women were often to the fore in organising local branches, subverting the official structure of the movement by their own commitment to fascism. Martin Durham and Julie Gottlieb's work has given us a much clearer, and more nuanced picture of the BUF's attitude to women, and women's ability to subvert assigned gender roles.<sup>44</sup> There was much in the BUF's policy and ideology that encouraged women to take the lead in the

<sup>43</sup> Chambers-Hunter was the author of a BUF pamphlet on social credit, *British Union and Social Credit* (London, no date, [1939?]). This is interesting as BUF policy did not embrace social credit theory, although there were similarities in terms of under-consumptionist ideas.

<sup>44</sup> M. Durham, 'Gender and the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History* 27 (1992) 513–29; 'Women and the British Union of Fascists, 1932–1940', *Immigrants*

movement, and in Scotland there were several notable examples of very active women fascist leaders. The most successful BUF branch in Edinburgh was led, in effect, by the women's leader, Maire Inglis. Similarly, Chambers-Hunter's most prominent activists in Aberdeen were his sister-in-law, Mrs A. Botha, and two women in their early twenties, Jenny Linton and Jane Imlah. These Aberdeen women fascists were vital to the intense activity of the BUF there, and appear to have been undeterred by the violent opposition which they frequently met.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, although the BUF managed to find some good local leaders, like Inglis, there were far fewer than were needed, and, furthermore, the national organisation of the BUF frequently failed to support its Scottish leaders, both effective and ineffective ones.

*The failure of BUF national leadership*

The BUF was characterised by an organisational and ideological commitment to hierarchy and centralism. Had the movement come to power in Britain it would have attempted to institute a radical change in the nature of British central and local government. The fascist corporate state would have replaced the geographical and parliamentary basis of representation with an occupational one, and local government would have been replaced by leaders appointed by central government.<sup>46</sup> This pattern was foreshadowed in the BUF's internal organisation, which, through a succession of reorganisations, remained true to the principles of leadership and hierarchy. Unfortunately for the BUF it proved unable to offer the necessary high quality of national leadership that was vital, both to offset problems with the heterogeneous nature of local leadership, and to support struggling areas, like Scotland.

There was a marked tendency, especially after 1934, for the national leadership of the BUF, based in London, to focus attention on the more obviously successful areas for the movement. Any area that looked as if progress would be difficult tended to be ignored by national headquarters. In part, this was a result of the almost continual financial problems that afflicted the BUF after its early days, and the subvention

<sup>44</sup> (*Continued*) and *Minorities* 8 (1989) 101–10; *Women and Fascism* (London, 1998). Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*; see also Cullen, 'Four Women for Mosley'.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Mrs Botha's own account of an attack on her in the police files: Edinburgh, National Archives of Scotland [NAS], HH55/705. Other women played an equally pivotal role in local fascist activity throughout Britain. A good example is Yolande Mott, who was the effective leader of the Hoylake and West Kirby branches of the BUF on the Wirral, as well as being a key figure in BUF activities in Liverpool. For details of Yolande Mott, see S. M. Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932–1940: ideology, membership, and meetings', unpublished M.Litt. thesis (University of Oxford, 1987), 96–7; Durham, 'Women and the British Union of Fascists', 15–16; and Yolande Mott's own autobiography, *Daughter of Evil* (London, 1980).

<sup>46</sup> O. Mosley, *Blackshirt Policy* (London, 1934); *Greater Britain; Ten Points of Fascism* (London, no date); and *Tomorrow We Live* (London, 1938). Also A Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State* (London, 1935); *The Economics of Fascism* (London, no date); and *Slump or Economic Dependence* (London, 1938).

of the party by Mussolini<sup>47</sup>. But there was also a lack of political realism, and a strategic ineptitude that affected leading figures in the movement, Mosley included. This can be seen in the concentration on BUF activities in the East End of London during the later 1930s. Mosley himself clearly enjoyed his forays into the area, where massive street meetings and popular acclaim in places like Bethnal Green doubtless helped sustain the illusion that the fascist victory was close at hand, or, at least, a possibility, however distant. The problem was that areas which desperately needed additional help, both financially and organisationally, did not get it, and policy priorities became dominated by the demands of areas like the East End – the increasing prominence of anti-semitism being a prime example<sup>48</sup>.

An early example of the national headquarters' disaffection with events in Scotland occurred in February 1935. A confidential Special Branch report on problems at national headquarters highlighted the feeling among the London leaders that Scotland was not doing as well as they thought it should have been, and that, as a result, 'there has been talk at headquarters of refusing to grant financial aid to the branches in Scotland'<sup>49</sup>. Yet 1934 was the most successful year for the BUF in Scotland, even if the London-based officials did not recognise it. In the end, the general financial crisis forced another reorganisation of the movement, and the chance was taken to greatly reduce national financial support to Scotland, when all paid administrative staff in Scotland were dismissed in March 1935.<sup>50</sup>

The failure to adequately support Scottish members can be further illustrated by the fact that Mosley made only two public appearances in Scotland as BUF leader, both at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh, in June 1934, and May 1936. On both occasions Mosley went out of his way to address national, Scottish, concerns, but the bussing of Blackshirts from the north of England to help their Scottish comrades steward the meetings, proved to be two of the very few occasions when Scottish fascists had organisational help from south of the border. This failure to provide much-needed help was seen to be a major weakness by Richard Plathen, one of the BUF's most dedicated and active men in Scotland. Plathen had been a prominent member of the NP, in which he was assistant to the Director of Organisation of NUPA, the NP's youth club. After the demise of the NP, Plathen moved to the BUF, rising to become Inspector for Scotland in 1936, a position he held until September 1938, when he married Maire Inglis, the Edinburgh

<sup>47</sup> For the first account of the actual method by which Italian fascist money reached the BUF see, S. M. Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists; the international dimension', *The Historian* 80 (2003) 34–5.

<sup>48</sup> See G. Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England, 1918–1939* (Basingstoke, 1978); and, as a further source of the BUF's anti-semitism, the direct link between German Nazis and members of the BUF, particularly former members of the British Fascists, Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists; the international dimension', 35–7.

<sup>49</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/20144, 674, 216/266.

<sup>50</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/20144, 674, 216/273.

West leader. Within the BUF Plathen was renowned for his loyalty to Mosley, and his dedication to the movement,<sup>51</sup> but even his dedication was strained by the lack of help he received from London. Shortly after his appointment to Inspector for Scotland, the Special Branch reported that Plathen was 'continually complaining of the lack of support from headquarters'.<sup>52</sup> By this time, one suspects, the London headquarters were content to let good Scottish leaders like Plathen languish.

Personality clashes between Scots and English leaders also hampered the progress of the Scottish BUF at various times. An important early casualty here was Dr. Robert Forgan, who had been Labour MP for West Renfrewshire from 1929 to 1931, when he went over to Mosley's NP. Like all the New Party's MPs, Forgan failed to be re-elected in 1931, but, despite his misgivings about the likelihood of fascism succeeding in Britain, he became the BUF's deputy leader and first director of organisation.<sup>53</sup> However, Forgan seems to have become the victim of factional fighting at the BUF's national headquarters, as a result of which he was switched from his duties in the early part of 1934, ostensibly so that he could inspect the BUF in Scotland, but, according to Special Branch reports, as a way of getting him out of London.<sup>54</sup> Worse was to follow, for Forgan became embroiled in financial scandal, the result of which was his resignation from the BUF in October 1934.<sup>55</sup> In effect, Forgan had been forced out of the movement, and under such disputed circumstances that it enabled anti-BUF Protestant extremists in Edinburgh to claim that Forgan had left the movement because he found out that it was run by Catholics. This claim was made by, among others, the well-known Protestant activist, William Weir Gilmour, and was, in many parts of Scotland in the 1930s, a serious and damaging allegation.<sup>56</sup>

If staff at the national headquarters in London saw Scotland as being a useful dump for senior officers, and former MPs, like Forgan, than their choice of liaison officer between London and Edinburgh was equally insensitive. It was not until November 1933 that the BUF managed to establish a branch in Edinburgh, with some fifty members under Major Sleigh, and a Mr Geddes. London appears to have wanted to boost the activities and membership of the Edinburgh BUF, and, as a result, sent Captain Vincent Collier to ginger up the new branch. Unfortunately for the BUF, Collier appears to have been insensitive to particularly Scottish concerns of the branch, the result being a split, over the national question, in early 1934. Once again, the Scottish

<sup>51</sup> See the unpublished history of the BUF written by a former national inspector of the movement, Richard R. Bellamy. Bellamy knew his manuscript as 'We Marched With Mosley', but it is held at Sheffield University Library as 'The Bellamy Manuscript' – p. 319 on Plathen.

<sup>52</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/20147, 674, 216/424.

<sup>53</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London, 1981 edition), 342.

<sup>54</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/20142, 674, 216/203.

<sup>55</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/20144, 674, 216/278.

<sup>56</sup> William Weir Gilmour in a telephone conversation with the author, 28 Jul.1992.



BUF members had been ill-served by their headquarters in London, although this time it was over an issue that may well have handicapped the movement more than it realised – Scottish national sentiment.

*Scottish nationalism and the BUF*

The late 1920s and the early 1930s was a time of flux for the Scottish nationalist movement, as Scottish nationalism was beginning to find its political feet, although real success was a long way off.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, Scottish nationalists certainly provided the BUF with rivals for membership and support, as the Edinburgh split of 1934 showed. The key policy issue that had precipitated the split in the Edinburgh BUF was Scotland's constitutional position. The BUF was firmly Unionist in its stance, although, as will be seen, Mosley and other senior figures made statements regarding administrative devolution in a fascist Britain. However, Edinburgh BUF members were interested in pursuing some kind of Home Rule policy, something that Collier, as national headquarters' representative was unlikely to have agreed to. Following the split, the ex-BUF members formed the Scottish Union of Fascists [SUF], with headquarters at 44 Hanover Street, and an initial membership of seventy. The SUF established links with Wendy Wood and the Scottish Democratic Self-Government Association, and presumably pursued a Scottish fascist policy. However, the SUF had a very short life, quickly merging with the Duke of Montrose's SP, which had been formed in 1932, and, from there, one can suppose, the ex-SUF members entered the new Scottish National Party [SNP] when it was formed by the merger of the SP and John MacCormick's NPS.<sup>58</sup>

There appears, then, to have been a patriotic potential that the BUF might have benefited from had it adopted a position more sympathetic to Scottish nationalist feeling. The Scottish nationalist movement was, at the time, in a very fluid state, with the more left-wing element following men like MacCormick and the NPS, which had been founded in 1928 from the Scots National League [SNL] and the Scottish National Movement [SNM]. However, this left of centre element was matched by the more conservative nationalists, of the sort to be found in the SP, and who dominated the early SNP. The failure of the BUF to articulate a clear Scottish national policy, perhaps some form of Home Rule within the Union, in all probability cost them some support from the right wing elements that were attracted, instead, to the nationalists. Indeed, the SNP were concerned by the possible overlapping appeal of their own nationalism with fascism, and one of the SNP's first actions was to issue a statement condemning fascism and dictatorship. The nationalists felt that there was a particular problem, 'as some of their members had made favourable noises about Fascism in the past, and may even have

<sup>57</sup> See Finlay, *Independent and Free*, especially chapters 3–5.

<sup>58</sup> TNA: PRO, Special Branch report in HO 144/20141, 674, 216/108.

continued to do so'.<sup>59</sup> The most vocal nationalist supporter of the fascist method of politics was, of course, Hugh MacDiarmid, who was actively interested in Mussolini and fascism in the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>60</sup>

Similar tensions between competing nationalist sentiments existed in Wales, where the Welsh Nationalist Party was led by two right-wing patriots, Ambrose Bebb and Saunders Lewis, both, in their different ways, heavily influenced by European far right ideology.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the various ethnic nationalist groups across Europe at this time often exhibited a degree of confusion as to their exact place on the political spectrum. This was something the Nazis later tried to take advantage of, with some success in Brittany, Flanders, and among Irish Republicans, such as the former International Brigades captain, Frank Ryan, whom the Germans hoped would liaise with the IRA for them before he died in Dresden in June 1944. German intelligence was also aware of the nationalist movement in Scotland, and shortly before the outbreak of the war sent Dr. von Teffenar on two visits to Scotland to make contacts with Scottish nationalists whom the Nazis hoped might act as some form of Scottish Fifth Column. Dr. von Teffenar's visits were known to the authorities, and seem to have been behind the raids on homes and premises of sixteen Scottish nationalists, most of whom were connected with fringe nationalist groups like the United Scottish Movement and the Scottish Socialist (1940) Party, but also including that of Ronald E. Muirhead, the Honorary President of the SNP, in May 1941. As a result of these raids, the police and Special Branch recovered from one house guns and ammunition, along with Nazi and fascist propaganda, and 'a copy letter which was sent to a known Nazi agent', Dr. von Teffenar.<sup>62</sup> One of those raided, Arthur Donaldson, the editor of *Scottish News and Comment*, was subsequently interned under the 18b Defence Regulations, and three Scottish republican papers were suppressed. The main fear of the authorities seems to have been connected with the activities of the Nazi agent, and also that some Scottish republican nationalists had been attempting to help men avoid conscription, an issue that deeply divided the more mainstream SNP. However, despite the fears of the British authorities, and the wartime operation of the German-based 'Radio Caledonia', there were

<sup>59</sup> Finlay, *Independent and Free*, 165.

<sup>60</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid's eclectic politics were in many ways, particular to the writer himself. However, he often came close to defining the essence of fascism, with such statements as 'We want a Scottish Fascism which shall be, where such laws are concerned ['anti-Scottish' land laws], a lawless believer in law – a rebel believer in authority'; from 'Plea for a Scottish Fascism', *Scottish Nation*, 5 Jun. 1923, quoted in A. Bold, *MacDiarmid* (London, 1988), 170. As late as May 1930, MacDiarmid was still championing a fascist style of politics with his attempt to create a Scottish Sinn Féin, Clann Albann, which he described as, 'The whole movement is on a militaristic basis, and in this resembles the Fascist movement', Bold, *MacDiarmid*, 282.

<sup>61</sup> Cullen, 'Another Nationalism', 103–4.

<sup>62</sup> See the police and Special Branch files at NAS, H55/557 and /558.

no takers of the collaborationist message among the ranks of Scottish nationalists.<sup>63</sup>

Scottish nationalism appears to have offered more than a competing claim for loyalty, for on at least one occasion, Scottish nationalists helped break up a BUF meeting in Edinburgh. A BUF meeting at the foot of the Mound on 20 June 1937, which had attracted about 10,000 people, was disrupted by both communists and Scottish nationalists. After the meeting, the small group of BUF supporters were attacked by the opposition, and a number of communists and nationalists were arrested, including Wendy Wood.<sup>64</sup> Clearly, the nationalists could be seen not only as rivals, but also as enemies.

### *BUF policy towards Scotland*

The BUF was a strongly programmatic party, stating its position on an incredibly wide variety of topics, from the Corporate State, to health care, motorways, and air-raid precautions.<sup>65</sup> Following the lead of Mosley, the BUF went out of its way to present its policies in a 'scientific' and modern fashion, and did so in a mass of books, booklets, and policy pamphlets, as well as in the countless speeches made by fascist leaders from 'Speakers' Notes' provided by national headquarters. Yet, despite all this, the BUF spent little time explaining the place of Scotland within their proposed fascist Britain. Only one policy pamphlet was produced, entitled *Fascism and Scotland* (1934), and articles in the fascist press about Scotland tended to concentrate on particular economic issues such as the fishing industry, agriculture, or the need for a Forth road bridge. Yet there was clearly a need for the movement in Scotland to spell out its position with regard to the constitutional question. This was done, most notably by Mosley himself, but in a rather vague fashion.

The implications of BUF policy for Scotland were explained by Mosley in his two Usher Hall speeches in 1934 and 1936. On both occasions Mosley spent some time dealing with Scottish aspirations, saying that 'he had the strongest sympathy with those who wanted to develop Scottish culture and interests'.<sup>66</sup> However, while recognising that Scotland had 'suffered greatly from the operations of Parliament at Westminster', Mosley argued that this was essentially because of the inherent inefficiency of a nineteenth century system of government.<sup>67</sup> Such an outdated system, he argued, was bound to be unable to deal

<sup>63</sup> On Nazi propaganda broadcasts to Scotland and Ireland, see BBC Radio Scotland, 'The Thistle, the Shamrock and the Swastika' and 'Three Kisses, Vicky', broadcast in December 1993. Also, BBC2 Scotland, 'Eorpa', 9 Mar. 1995 – a programme on the links between Celtic nationalism and the Nazis during the Second World War.

<sup>64</sup> *The Scotsman*, 21 Jun. 1937.

<sup>65</sup> N. Nugent, 'The Ideas of the British Union of Fascists', in N. Nugent and R. King (eds), *The British Right* (Farnborough, 1977), 133–64; Cullen, 'Development of the Ideas and Policy of the British Union of Fascists', 115–36.

<sup>66</sup> *The Scotsman*, 16 May 1936.

<sup>67</sup> *The Scotsman*, 2 Jun. 1934.

with the economic problems of the twentieth century, and only a revolution in the nature of the political and economic system could solve the problems of Scotland, or England. So Mosley's solution was not the establishment of a Scottish parliament, which he argued would merely replicate the errors of the London parliament, but the creation of a fascist Corporate State. Yet, he recognised that Scotland needed more than this, for, in his 1934 Usher Hall speech, Mosley said that under fascism, 'Scottish affairs should be settled by Scotsmen on the spot'.<sup>68</sup> This rather vague line was also taken by another key BUF speaker, William Joyce, when he made a speaking tour of Scotland in 1935. Nonetheless, the central point was that Scotland shared many of the same economic problems as England (especially in terms of the collapse of the old export markets for coal, shipbuilding and textiles), and that such problems could only be solved within the context of Britain and the Empire, albeit under a new system of government. Within that vision there was, presumably, little place for any substantial form of self-government for Scotland. Clearly, Mosley realised that there was a degree of national sentiment in Scotland that had to be addressed, but felt that the economic programme put forward by the BUF would be enough. It is difficult to say whether Mosley and the BUF were correct in this assessment, but it is the case that, compared to the amount of energy devoted to developing the BUF's policies on other topics, little time was devoted to assessing the particular policy needs of Scotland.

### *Religious issues*

Despite claims by later generations of anti-fascists that the BUF was closely associated in Scotland with Protestant extremists,<sup>69</sup> in reality, as Milligan has suggested, the BUF faced opposition from militant Protestants.<sup>70</sup> This was especially the case in Edinburgh and Leith, where Protestant activists were very successful in the 1930s, winning a

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> An article entitled, 'Loyalists and Fascism' in Anti-Fascist Action's *Fighting Talk*, 4 (no date, [mid-1990s?]), 3–5, claims that the Protestant extremist and razor gang leader, Billy Fullerton, 'on the founding of Mosley's British Union of Fascists [...] became a section commander [sic] at the head of 200 Blackshirts in Glasgow', and that in '1932 the Blackshirted Billy Boys were responsible for an attack upon the National Unemployed Workers Movement march'. It seems very unlikely that Fullerton was in the BUF, for as late as May 1934, the Special Branch reported that there was no BUF organisation in Glasgow, and it is unlikely that even after the BUF did establish a branch in the city (sometime in the summer of 1934) they were ever able to muster as many as 200 Blackshirts, the total number of all members (including inactive members, who would not have worn the black shirt) by October 1934 being around 120, which may well represent the greatest extent of the movement in the city (although Maitles estimates that the BUF's high water mark in Glasgow was 50 members in 1935; Maitles, 'Blackshirts Across the Border', 96; this figure seems a little low). See police and Special Branch reports in the TNA: PRO, HO 144/20141, 674, 216/108, and HO 144/20144, 674, 216/270, *The Blackshirt*, 21 Sep. 1934, and *The Scotsman*, 16 Jun. 1934.

<sup>70</sup> Milligan, 'The British Union of Fascists' Policy in Relation to Scotland', 11–12.

number of council seats, and mounting an active, and often violent, anti-Catholic campaign on the streets of Scotland's capital.<sup>71</sup> The BUF consistently maintained an impartial line, arguing that both Protestants and Catholics could be good fascists and loyal Britons. In the sectarian atmosphere that dominated street politics at the time, this was a line that guaranteed problems for the movement, and led to accusations that the BUF was a Catholic front organisation. As one heckler at a BUF meeting in Edinburgh put it, neatly combining anti-Italian prejudice with anti-Catholicism: 'a lot of your Blackshirts are Italians and you're under the Pope of Rome'.<sup>72</sup> The BUF was never able to counter these allegations successfully, and it is clear that by refusing to take a partisan line on the religious issue the BUF was never able to win the support of many Protestants, while Catholics do not seem to have been drawn to the movement in abnormally large numbers, perhaps, in Edinburgh at least, because the BUF were pre-empted by an anti-Catholic party that also claimed to be fascist. This failure to identify with one or other sectarian tendency may well have been a key factor in explaining the failure of the BUF in Scotland, especially in terms of street politics. Indeed, in a slightly different context, Bill Murray has argued that the important social and religious underpinnings to football support in the period helps explain the failure of both communists and fascists to find any widespread following in Scotland in the 1930s.<sup>73</sup>

Although the BUF was founded in October 1932, it was not until November 1933, that the first Edinburgh branch of the movement was founded. This delay in founding a branch in the capital may well have been a costly mistake. Ironically, the trouble for the BUF came from the former New Party parliamentary candidate for Coatbridge, William Weir Gilmour, who was later to claim that his short-lived Scottish Democratic Fascist Party [SDFP] prevented the BUF from taking advantage of Catholic support<sup>74</sup>. Gilmour had a varied political career, having been a member of the ILP, as well as the NP, and was also influenced by Daniel De Leon, Hugh MacDiarmid, Scottish nationalism, and Liberalism. His SDFP was coporatist, Scottish nationalist, and vehemently anti-Catholic. The similarity between the SDFP's economic programme and that of the BUF's, in addition to Gilmour's previous association with Mosley and the NP, may well have been enough to give credence to the idea that the BUF was also anti-Catholic. Furthermore, to make matters worse, and more complex, for

<sup>71</sup> Violent anti-Catholic agitation reached a peak with the massive Protestant Action demonstration against a Catholic Eucharistic conference held in Edinburgh in 1935, when Protestants marched in their thousands under banners reading, 'No Priest but Christ', and 'For God and Truth', clashing violently with police. See police records in NAS, HH1/777.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted by Milligan, 'The British Union of Fascists' Policy in Relation to Scotland', 12.

<sup>73</sup> B. Murray, *The Old Firm: Sectarianism, Sport and Society in Scotland*, new edn (Edinburgh, 1994), 4–5.

<sup>74</sup> T. Gallagher, *Glasgow: The Uneasy Peace* (Manchester, 1987), 215.

the BUF, Gilmour claimed that the Mosley movement was ‘run by Roman Catholics, organised by Roman Catholics, in the interests of Roman Catholics’,<sup>75</sup> thereby catching the BUF in a double bind.

The BUF’s response to the policy stance of the SDFP was to issue a disclaimer, which stated, ‘We [the BUF] disagree... entirely with their [the SDFP] attitudes towards Roman Catholics’, and, ‘on the matter of Roman Catholicism... we state our entire disagreement’.<sup>76</sup> Such an approach, later expanded in a number of more detailed condemnations of religious sectarianism, doubtless prevented the BUF from establishing itself more effectively among groups that might have been potentially fertile ground for the movement. Gilmour’s SDFP did not last long, but the legacy remained, and was enhanced by the much more successful anti-Catholic movement in Edinburgh – Protestant Action [PA]. The sectarian policies of both the SDFP and PA illustrate that in Edinburgh (as with the Protestant League in Glasgow) extremism and street politics could not be divorced from religious issues, and that in trying to do so, the BUF handicapped itself in the struggle for support.

By 1935 the BUF had three branches in Edinburgh and Leith, a central branch, a West Edinburgh branch, and a Leith branch. But by then radical politics in Leith and Edinburgh were dominated by John Cormack’s PA. Leith was PA’s stronghold, with the movement capturing six seats in the 1936 municipal election, but PA also made its presence felt across Edinburgh, in violent attacks on Catholics and with massive street demonstrations.<sup>77</sup> But not only was PA anti-Catholic, it was also anti-fascist, with Cormack telling *The Edinburgh Evening Dispatch* in November 1936, that ‘all our energies will be directed against the Fascists. When I get control, I will put a ban on Fascists on the streets’.<sup>78</sup> Against this background of PA activity and anti-BUF hostility, there was little hope for the Leith fascists, and beyond Leith the BUF had to strive to convince Protestants that it was not a Catholic organisation. For example, it was in reply to just such an allegation, made by *Bulwark*, that the Hon. H. M. Upton of Balmaclellan, a former Unionist and a recent convert to the BUF, made a speech at the Orange Hall, Motherwell, in May 1935. Upton said that an inquiry into the number of Catholics in leadership posts in the BUF had revealed that only 12 per cent of such posts were held by Catholics.<sup>79</sup> The report in *The Blackshirt* that covered Upton’s speech also made clear, yet again, the BUF’s attitude to Protestant and Catholic rivalry, stating that

<sup>75</sup> Gilmour, in a telephone conversation with the author, 28 Jul. 1992.

<sup>76</sup> *The Blackshirt*, 16 Jun. 1933.

<sup>77</sup> T. Gallagher, ‘Protestant Extremism in Urban Scotland, 1930–1939; its growth and contraction’, *SHR* 64 (1985) 156–61.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>79</sup> *The Blackshirt*, 17 May 1935.

men of all religions can unite in a Movement which aims to restore the nation's greatness and promote the happiness of the people by abolishing the poverty and social ills of democracy, and that in the classless society of the Blackshirts the loyal citizens of Scotland, both Protestant and Catholic, will find a common purpose.<sup>80</sup>

That was not a message that would have been well received by the supporters of PA, or many other Protestants concerned about the threat from Rome.

### *Rival fascist parties*

One of the interesting aspects of extremist politics in Scotland during this period is the surprisingly large number of fascist or quasi-fascist parties in existence. There were at least ten such groups operating at various times in Scotland. The presence of such a large number of groups suggests that the BUF was unable to act as a unifying force in terms of far-right politics, and that it was never able to eclipse other fascist groups in the same way as it did in England, where the only real rivals were Arnold Leese's small nazi group, the IFL, and William Joyce's even smaller NSL.

From what is known of these Scottish rivals to the BUF, it seems that many of them were founded on a platform that included some appeal to Scottish Home Rule sentiment, or to Protestant militancy. This was obviously the case with the SDFP, while the breakaway SUF in Edinburgh was built around a Scottish nationalist position. Similarly, a group that pre-dated the BUF was a quasi-fascist group of Scottish Loyalists under the Earl of Glasgow, which claimed 2,000 supporters.<sup>81</sup> There is also a good case for seeing both PA and the Protestant League as representing a northern European and Protestant variety of the sort of clerical fascism that was common in central and southern Europe. Indeed, the squadrist tactics of PA in Edinburgh look far more 'fascist' than anything the BUF did in Scotland.<sup>82</sup>

On the other side of the religious divide, the expatriate Italian community in Scotland maintained branches of the National Fascist Party [PNF].<sup>83</sup> This allegiance to Italian Fascism was more a cultural phenomenon than a political one, but expatriate membership of the PNF was widespread among Italian-Scots, and Edinburgh and Glasgow boasted very active *fascio* that ran club houses, the *Casa d'Italia*, that

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 May 1935.

<sup>81</sup> M. Fry, *Patronage and Principle: A Political History of Modern Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1987), 180.

<sup>82</sup> See examples of PA's violence in NAS, HH1/777; Gallagher, 'Protestant Extremism', 158–9.

<sup>83</sup> T. Colpi, *The Italian Factor: The Italian Community in Great Britain* (Edinburgh, 1991). Claudia Baldoli's more recent, and fascinating, *Exporting Fascism; Italian Fascists and Britain's Italians in the 1930s* (Oxford, 2003), makes only passing mention of Italian Fascism and the Italian community in Scotland and Wales, where there was also a substantial Italian presence.

acted as centres of community life for Italians in Scotland. In addition to the *fascio* in Edinburgh and Glasgow, there were also active groups in Coatbridge, Motherwell, Paisley, Aberdeen, and Dundee. In all, nearly 50 per cent of Italian-Scots were full members of the PNF by 1933.<sup>84</sup> The BUF did not make any formal overtures to these Blackshirts, which is, perhaps, strange, as expatriate BUF branches were active in Italy, and the BUF maintained official ties with the PNF.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, individual members of the BUF attempted to make contact with individual Italian-Scots Blackshirts. A senior member of the Edinburgh *fascio*, Joseph Pia, remembered BUF members from Stockbridge attempting, in vain, to get him interested in their activities. Pia, like most other Italian-Scots, regarded membership of the PNF as being primarily a cultural issue, peculiar to their community, rather than a more general political statement.<sup>86</sup>

Finally, the BUF seems to have either failed to, or made no attempt to, absorb the fairly large number of members of the BF in Glasgow – a Special Branch report noted that there were around 400 Glasgow BF members in May 1934, although most were inactive. The relationship between the BF and the BUF had been complex from the outset. Some BF members, led by Neil Francis Hawkins (later to become second in command of the BUF) joined the BUF at its foundation in October 1932, bequeathing, among other things, an anti-Semitic inheritance to the new movement.<sup>87</sup> Other members of the terminally ill BF, which collapsed late in 1934, were hostile to the new fascist movement, and in 1933 there was even violence between the two groups in London.<sup>88</sup> This hostility reflected the standpoint of the BF's leader, Rotha Lintorn Orman, and defeated a further attempt by the BUF to absorb the rump of her party in July 1934.<sup>89</sup> It may have been that the wider hostility, or, perhaps more likely, the inactivity of BF members in Glasgow, prevented the Scottish BUF from drawing upon this pre-existing pool of fascists.

All these fascist groups certainly represented potential pools of support for the BUF, but support that the movement was effectively isolated from because of its policies (whether religious or constitutional), or its failure to show sufficient flexibility in a political situation that was, in important respects, quite different from that in England.

<sup>84</sup> Colpi, *Italian Factor*, 93.

<sup>85</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists; the international dimension', 34–7. See also the British Embassy notes about the activities of the BUF branches in Rome and Florence, in TNA: PRO, HO 144/20141, 674, 216/92, June 1934.

<sup>86</sup> 'The Recollections of Joseph Pia', BBC Radio Scotland broadcast, 15 August, 1994. Pia was in charge of youth sports events at the Edinburgh *Casa d'Italia*, while his uncle was the Italian Fascist leader for Edinburgh. Pia later became friendly with a number of BUF leaders when they were all interned at York racecourse. Three of the BUF men had been CPGB organisers before joining the BUF.

<sup>87</sup> For the BF source of anti-Semitism in the BUF, see Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists; the international dimension', 35–6.

<sup>88</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, 65.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–6.



*Anti-fascist opposition and violence*

In Maitles' work, anti-fascist opposition to the BUF is seen as the deciding factor in the failure of the fascist movement in Scotland. Maitles provides interesting oral history testimony which gives a good indication of the aims of some anti-fascists. For example, Maitles cites Morris Smith, who was the secretary of the Glasgow Workers Circle (a grouping of left-wing Jews), to show that this group of anti-fascists had a straightforward policy of preventing the BUF from speaking. Morris Smith commented:

They [the BUF] never got a chance as they were howled down. They never got a turnout, and I don't think they recruited anyone. That was the line then, we had to stop them appearing on the streets.<sup>90</sup>

Morris was talking about anti-fascist opposition in Glasgow, but Maitles also briefly addressed the anti-fascist campaign in Aberdeen:

Opponents of the BUF responded to the threat [of the BUF], heckling at meetings and trying to break up rallies when they could. Street clashes in Aberdeen attracted widespread press interest.<sup>91</sup>

The anti-fascist opposition in Aberdeen was certainly very vigorous, and frequently violent, as anti-fascists, 'mostly in the Communist Party . . . sought to disrupt every meeting that the fascists attempted to hold in Aberdeen'.<sup>92</sup> This disruption ranged from organised chanting, to physical attacks involving bricks, sticks, fireworks, and stones, and 'man handling'.<sup>93</sup>

The question of political violence has long been central to the historiography of the BUF. The general consensus has been that the BUF in some way used political violence in order to boost its own position. The BUF always denied this accusation, arguing that it was merely seeking to guarantee free speech by protecting its meetings from anti-fascists whose only aim was to prevent the fascist case from being heard. The anti-fascists' case was that the policies and appearance of the BUF were provocative, and that the example of Fascist Italy, then of Nazi Germany, showed that the BUF should not be permitted any sort of platform. Historians have, to some extent, accepted the latter, 'no platform' argument, which has informed a number of accounts.<sup>94</sup> However, a strong argument can be made that the BUF did not use violence as a political tactic, and were far more the victims of political

<sup>90</sup> Maitles, 'Blackshirts Across the Border', 95.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>92</sup> Kibblewhite & Rigby, *Fascism in Aberdeen*, 24.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 25, 27, 28, 33–4, 37, 41, for a good overview of such tactics.

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, D. Renton, *Redshirts and Black: Fascists and Anti-Fascists in Oxford in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1996); D. Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur; Mosley, Fascism and British Society* (Manchester, 1987); Kibblewhite and Rigby, *Fascism in Aberdeen*; N. Todd, *In Excited Times: The People Against the Blackshirts* (Whitley Bay/Newcastle upon Tyne, 1995).

violence than they were the perpetrators of such violence<sup>95</sup>. This is not to say that the BUF did not, in some ways, benefit from attacks upon their organisation, as evidence shows that well-publicised clashes, such as that at Olympia in June 1934, led to an increase in BUF recruitment, although the violence at the Olympia meeting may well have damaged the movement's general image.<sup>96</sup> Discussion of the Olympia meeting in itself, and as a useful encapsulation of key issues surrounding the question of violence, has recently engendered a fascinating debate led by Martin Pugh and Jon Lawrence.<sup>97</sup> One of the most interesting new lines of enquiry undertaken by Lawrence is his widening of the debate to encompass the whole issue of the changing nature of political meetings in the first half of the twentieth century. In this light, it may be argued that the BUF's reliance on large indoor and outdoor meetings was becoming increasingly anachronistic by the 1930s.<sup>98</sup> However, the movement had few other avenues to follow in pursuing its case, while it can be argued that the opposition they faced had a unifying effect on their own activists – something the movement welcomed. The violence that the BUF was often faced with helped convince fascist militants that they were engaged in an historic struggle, and that they were in the process of becoming 'new' fascist men and women. For these militants, being attacked at their meetings and rallies, or when selling newspapers, was evidence that they were on the right track, it was what they expected as activists in the 'modern movement'. Further, as Richard Thurlow has noted in his review of the issue, the issue of provocation is a complex one.<sup>99</sup> However, it is possible to say that it was highly unusual for the BUF to attack its opponents' meetings, marches, or rallies, whereas the pattern of attacks on the BUF's events across the whole of Britain, indicates that for the anti-fascists, offensive, political violence was a key tactic. It was the BUF's opponents, and in particular the CPGB, its front organisation, the NUWM, and smaller groups of anti-fascists, who consistently used violence as a deliberate political tactic.

<sup>95</sup> Cullen, 'Political Violence', 245–67.

<sup>96</sup> See the MI5 report of August 1934, in TNA: PRO, HO, 144/20142, 674, 216/178, which stated that the Olympia meeting 'gave a fillipp [sic] to recruitment to the BUF'. The celebrated 'Battle of Cable Street' in October 1936 appears to have had a similar effect on BUF membership. On the impact of the Olympia meeting, which was long seen to be a disaster for the BUF, Martin Pugh, 'The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia debate', *Historical Journal* 41 (1998) 529–42 has argued that the picture was much more mixed, and that the anti-fascist demonstrators at the rally were seen, by many, as being at fault, rather than the fascists' aggressive and violent stewarding.

<sup>97</sup> J. Lawrence, 'Fascist violence and the politics of public order in inter-war Britain: the Olympia debate revisited', *Historical Research* 76 (2003), 238–67; J. Lawrence, 'Why Olympia mattered', *Historical Research* 78 (2005) 263–72; M. Pugh, 'The National Government, the British Union of Fascists and the Olympia debate', *Historical Research* 78 (2005) 253–62.

<sup>98</sup> J. Lawrence, 'The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War', *Past and Present* no. 190 (2006) 185–216.

<sup>99</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Modern Britain*, 73. Thurlow offers a very useful review of the issue of political violence, the BUF, and anti-fascists in the chapter 'Fascist Thugs?', 72–80.

The most consistent anti-fascist violence in Scotland came in Aberdeen, where anti-fascists repeatedly broke up the BUF's meetings, and carried out violent assaults on the one-armed BUF leader, Chambers-Hunter. Aberdeen police files give a picture of a broad anti-fascist front, consisting of activists from the CPGB, the ILP, and the NUWM acting in collusion with Labour Party and ILP city councillors to prevent the Aberdeen BUF from holding meetings or selling their propaganda. This anti-fascist front also took advantage of a botched police operation at a BUF meeting in October 1937 to attempt to undermine the position of the Chief Constable by instigating an inquiry into his leadership. This move, however, foundered on legal questions.<sup>100</sup>

Maitles' oral history work on anti-fascism in Glasgow is supported by police reports from the city. For example, police records show that it was the NUWM which was responsible for the breaking up of Mosley's New Party meeting on Glasgow Green in September 1931, although they suggest that the razor attacks on Mosley's group may have been exaggerated by the press.<sup>101</sup> Who was responsible for the attacks against the Perth BUF branch leader, George Budge, in the late 1930s is unclear, but he suffered several violent assaults and was left with lasting facial injuries. The Scottish BUF appear not to have attacked any of their opponents, and no attempt at all was made to disrupt non-fascist meetings, or to prevent non-fascists selling newspapers. The only occasion on which the BUF used violence was during Mosley's two meetings in Edinburgh in 1934 and 1936, and in both cases there were more injuries suffered by fascists, and of a far more serious nature (including a Blackshirt blinded in one eye), than by anti-fascists. It would seem that the Scottish BUF, like their English counterparts, were far more the victims of political violence than the perpetrators.

#### *Conclusion; the failure of the BUF in Scotland*

By 1939 the BUF in Scotland was showing all the signs of terminal decline, and it is unlikely that the movement would have recovered, even if it had not been banned in the spring of 1940, and over 1,000 of its activists were interned (only three of whom were from Scotland). Not only had the Scottish BUF's activity moved to focus on small, indoor meetings, but the tone of its propaganda in Scotland had, by 1938, begun to show signs of desperation and failure, with a previously, for the Scottish BUF, rare note of anti-semitism coming to the fore. By the outbreak of war, the BUF in Scotland depended entirely on a small number of dedicated and peripatetic activists to spread the word – an almost hopeless task.

The causes of the BUF's failure in Scotland were many, and, to a degree, inter-related. The factors reviewed here fall into two groups,

<sup>100</sup> Police reports in NAS, HH55/704, and HH55/705.

<sup>101</sup> Police reports in NAS, HH55/332.

those that were internal to the movement, and those that were external. In the first category it is possible to group leadership and organisational weaknesses. For a new political movement like the BUF, without any pre-existing constituency, it was vital that it could attract leaders who possessed the right attributes in terms of their place within the social fabric of local life, along with the necessary enthusiasm to make the most of their task. However, the BUF in Scotland could find few leaders with a broad enough social profile, like James Little in Dalbeattie, or enthusiastic militants like Chambers-Hunter in Aberdeen or Maire Inglis in Edinburgh. Similarly, the BUF in Britain as a whole was weakened by organisational problems, financial crises (especially after the reduction of the Italian subvention of £36,000 a year to £12,000 a year in 1936), and poor management skills among national leaders. For the Scottish BUF this meant that the organisational support that they so desperately needed from their stronger English colleagues was never forthcoming.

The movement also suffered from external problems that were particular to Scotland. Throughout Britain, the BUF found it difficult to establish itself in an already crowded political landscape, but in Scotland additional issues had to be dealt with. Foremost among these were the questions of Scotland's constitutional position, and the religious issue. The BUF found itself squeezed by the nascent nationalist movement, and perhaps in a less identifiable way, by a more pervasive Scottish nationalism that cut across the British nationalism of the BUF. Similarly, the BUF sought to downgrade Scotland's strong religious antagonisms, arguing that they had no place in a 'modern movement', or a future fascist Britain. This appeal, however, fell on deaf ears in many areas where religious sectarianism held a widespread attraction, both electorally and on the streets. Finally, the BUF faced rivalry and opposition on both its flanks, with other far-right groups offering a more particularly Scottish brand of extremism, while the BUF's anti-fascist enemies pursued a vigorous, and often violent, campaign against the movement. In Scotland, the BUF found that their already difficult task was made almost impossible by the existence of politics and prejudices that the fascists did not have to contend with in England.