

# The *Authority* of Reality: (Re)Writing the Miners' Strike 1984-5

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*We are living through history ... I am going to write an account of the happenings during the strike. For our children the memory would fade, and it really shouldn't.*<sup>1</sup>

In 1984, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government announced that it intended to close twenty pits because they had become 'uneconomical.' Potentially this would lead to mass job losses since mines had been the primary source of employment in many towns and villages for generations. Fearful of the impact these measures would have in their own areas, miners at other pits began to come out on strike as concern grew for the future of the industry and rumours of further closures spread. The ensuing yearlong conflict which Arthur Scargill dubbed "a social and industrial Battle of Britain" led to the wholesale destruction of the nationalised coal industry, the erosion of industrial relations and the extinction of a way of life.

In 2004, I discovered and analysed a hitherto unknown archive of poetry written by miners and their families during the strike as part of my doctoral research. The archive provides twenty-first century readers with new perspectives on what was arguably the defining event in the history of industrial conflict in Britain. This paper aims to illuminate routes into and ways of responding to these new perspectives on conflict. Highlighting key concerns and perspectives within the archive, I present striking miners as writers for a readership at local, national and oppositional levels, addressing the local coalfield community, the wider National Union of Mineworkers strike community, and the government's counter-representations of miners and their cause. This archive of strike

<sup>1</sup> Mackney, *Birmingham and the Miners' Strike*, 97.

poetry was collected, collated and transcribed in partnership with the Working Class Movement Library in Salford and the National Coal Mining Museum in Wakefield. Far from this being an exercise in 'retro nostalgia,' the writings are examined as pieces of history; missing aspects of accounts of the conflict. The aim of this research is not to correct the historical representations of existing literatures with a 'true' version of history, but to juxtapose them with other facts and heterodox – sometimes contradictory – ways of configuring the events in question.

This archive of new empirical evidence has important implications for literary, theoretical and historical perceptions of the 1984-5 strike. The literature produced by miners and their families during the strike, traversing genres as diverse as poetry, song, autobiography, diaries and letters, adds a new dimension to existing perspectives and received wisdom concerning the conflict. This untapped resource of personal records and accounts provides unique and valuable perspectives on the strike which have previously been sidelined by published works as well as by competing cinematic and fictional adaptations of events.

Published literature about the miners' strike has been extensive.<sup>2</sup> Miners' perspectives on the strike sit alongside those published works as well as works of fiction which pose as 'faction,' purportedly based on versions of what might have happened during the conflict.<sup>3</sup> These texts create tensions between differing accounts of historical conflict, highlighting potential dangers in representations which claim to be 'authentic' and drawing attention to the ways in which established, published authors can oppress or compete with miners' writings.

Compared with the vast array of published accounts, much less attention has been paid to working-class perspectives in the twenty years since the strike. Instead, this period has been marked by the neglect and negation of the working-class writer. In *The Heart and Soul of It*, a record of how the strike affected people from the pit

<sup>2</sup> Most notably Smith, *A Civil War without Guns*; and Adeney and Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike 1984-5*.

<sup>3</sup> Recent examples include Peace, *GB84*; and *Faith*.

village of Worsbrough, one of the writers notes in his introduction that:

Whilst looking into local history for certain information about the 1926 Miners' Strike, it became apparent that too little was recorded about the people most affected by the strike.<sup>4</sup>

Yet writing was a fundamental part of the 1984-5 strike, acknowledged by the strikers as a valuable tool with which to articulate their beliefs and rights. Why, then, are miners' writings largely absent in all published accounts of the conflict? Why, until last year, were they exiled to the archives of specialist museums and collections, neither catalogued nor previously studied?

Unlike existing published works on the strike, which are circulated in neat, convenient paper and hardback forms, this literature was found on scraps of lined paper, on blank fly-leaves torn from novels and school textbooks, in old exercise books, on the backs of cereal packets, on till receipts and scribbled at the edges of pages in instructional booklets. In writing literally on the margins of existing literature, mining communities showed immense resourcefulness and purposefulness in producing writings which acted as a powerful form of self-representation and self-definition.

This new body of writing ultimately posed as many questions as it answered. Many of us 'know' the events of the strike, but through what lenses has our knowledge been shaped? Both Margaret Thatcher and Ian MacGregor, the Director of the National Coal Board, actively rose to the challenge set out by the miners by employing the press and the powers of government to destroy the strike movement. Unable to wield this kind of control over the mass media and starved of political representation, the strikers instead responded through the medium of literature.

During the strike, poetry provided miners and their families with an opportunity to have their individual voice recognised and considered. The motivation to write came from many diverse sources. A likely factor driving many members of mining communities to put

<sup>4</sup> Worsbrough Community Support Group, *The Heart and Soul of It*, 2.

pen to paper was the desire to make their voice heard in a sea of competing discourses; the desire to provide an account of the strike from their own perspective. This motivation seems to be part of a wider recuperative strategy in the face of the erasure of a way of life; an attempt to establish a voice which represented a community and a solidarity of feeling. The strategies of recuperation employed in these writings insist upon the importance of re-positioning the 'story' of the strike, highlighting the perspective from within, to locate and promote a different version of reality.

Another significant part of this motivation was the need to author an 'honest' and transparent account of the conflict. During a period in which it was impossible not to take sides, the miners' brutally candid and open style of writing was both refreshing and effective. This transparency of opinion is one of its great strengths. Miners and their families were subject to all kinds of pressures and frustrations which remain unrecognised in published writings. The picket line was an obvious outlet for some of these frustrations, but writing also provided a significant form of catharsis. Over the course of the strike, literature became an outlet for all the pressures endured by these communities, a voice in a cultural climate which overwhelmingly demanded their silence.

Certain periods during this conflict seem to have created the conditions necessary for literary output. As well as being a period of great uncertainty, the initial stages of the strike constituted the chance of a lifetime for miners – never again did most men think they would have the time to sit and write down the long-standing thoughts which resulted from a lifetime down the mine. This opportunity to record their opinions on the 'great abstractions' was one which miners seized enthusiastically.

In poems produced during the opening months of the strike, miners seem to look on the 'bright side' of the situation by revelling in the opportunity it afforded for unrestricted artistic expression and the chance to confront and redefine images of mining life. This extraordinary and innovative body of writing effectively re-writes the first stages of the conflict from the perspectives of strikers and in doing so provides a remarkable foreword to the literature which was to follow.

These poems differ markedly from those written in the later half of 1984-5. Early poems are concerned with issues as diverse as mining history, contemporary social observations and international politics. In several of these poems, the earthiness and purposefulness of mining life is reinforced through the construction of miners as elementary figures who embody a set of eternal values. The physically enclosed environment of mining immediately draws a close alignment between the miner and nature. Early poems tend to valorise the occupation of the miner, presenting the toil of the average worker as heroic but also detailing a distinct beauty in the brawn of the mining world. Poems such as “Men and Mines” appear to suggest that the miner carries with him a sense of historical resonance, secure in the knowledge that he is part of both the history and the future of his landscape, his kingdom:

A splintered rock reveals  
A fossil cryptic sign  
They are the subtle prints  
Of sunlight, a code that marks  
A moment of a thousand years. (l.6-10)<sup>5</sup>

This sense of possession, pride and belonging is central to the miner’s relationship with the pit in these initial poems and may go some way towards explaining miners’ later opposition to the notions of ‘nomad capitalism’ advocated by the Thatcher government.<sup>6</sup>

Heritage is another key theme in these early poems. Many writers were motivated to write in the early stages of the strike by the desire to educate the reader in mining heritage and oral traditions. As one miner claims in retrospect:

The inspiration to write my story came from the genuine fear that with the closing of so many pits and the disappearing of so many mining villages ... our traditions are coming to an end. If

<sup>5</sup> *Men and Mines*, Miners’ Strike Papers.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, *Resources of Hope*, 124.

this continued destruction succeeds what can we offer our children as heritage?<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps partly in response to the deficit of poems from the 1926 strike, many writers from 1984-5 appear to articulate the need to preserve mining heritage and voice their discontent at growing threats to their culture.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, these poems illustrate a desire to communicate a specific situation. Running through them is the need to educate the reader in mining history and the need to learn from history rather than from modern 'progressive' ideas. Central to this idea is the concept of the mine as not only the community's, but the nation's, heart and soul.

In response to this growing social, political and economic onslaught, many striking writers employed their literature to confront the government with a new type of counter-economics, borne out of the need for an alternative, combative discourse with which to challenge and engage Thatcher's New Right terminology.<sup>9</sup> Early strike poems suggest that the government's language was centred on abstract figures and terms rather than on the human force behind the mining industry. The main concern of miners seems to be that the policies of the Thatcher government are concerned with the good of the few rather than that of the many, and that this creates tension between those in power and the miners' collectivist culture. In these early poems miners can be seen to re-visualise the political situation by giving it a human face, putting real lives and real people at the forefront of the debate:

Don't they realise  
It's people they're talking about  
We're not machines  
To be put on the scrap heap

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *The Politics of the Yorkshire Miners*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Men and Mines, Communities under Attack*; and K. Briggs, *Coal Not Dole, Miners' Strike Papers*.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussions of 'Thatcherism' see Thatcher, *Margaret Thatcher*; Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*; and Blake, *The World According to Margaret Thatcher*.

Or animals out to graze  
 We have pride, feelings, names. (l.7-12)<sup>10</sup>

As a result of this, there is a marked resistance in much early poetry to the term “progress” and its implications for the industry. The economic objectivity of the government becomes a primary concern for miners as they re-assert their own protests as individuals rather than as a faceless “working class.” (“But what price is progress? Our future’s at stake.” – l.18)<sup>11</sup> In these poems greed is inexorably linked to the Tory government while the miners actively associate themselves with a more egalitarian, equal, socialist society. Significantly, the state is depicted as an alien and dictatorial force long before the large-scale mobilisation of government forces to quash the strike in its later phases.

Poems from the beginning of the conflict set out the key principles on which the strike will be fought, but also provide a brief glimpse into the new class-consciousness developing among miners. This is reinforced by the conviction and determination of poems such as *On the Right Track*:

Don’t stand by  
 To see your pit die  
 Don’t sell your job  
 To MacGregor and his mob

We’ll struggle to pay  
 But at the end of the day  
 Things are turning out right  
 Because we’re beginning to reunite  
 And we’re closer than you think  
 Ready to cause a stink  
 So MacGregor  
 You beggar  
 Watch out! (l.1-13)

<sup>10</sup> *What Difference?*, Miners’ Strike Documents Folder.

<sup>11</sup> Collinson, *Dirty Work*, Miners’ Strike Papers.

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Effectively colloquial and accessible in style, this poem confirms a faith in the working class and the power that they can wield when united. Its confrontational style is almost a directional instruction on how to approach the strike, and is reminiscent of the “rhythms of struggle” that Searle addressed in his review of mining poetry.<sup>12</sup> Most poems regard the continual turmoil and strife faced by the working class as part of a wider historical struggle between ‘us’ and ‘them.’<sup>13</sup> The message seems to be that only by uniting will the working class stand any chance of winning. Ensuing political attacks are reserved for prominent government bodies and figures, and their lack of humanity towards mining communities:

They have no compassion for you and I  
Let our children starve and die  
There’s a sight more chance that you’ll see pigs fly  
Than you’ll see the Coal Board care. (l.21-24)<sup>14</sup>

The miners’ response to their dehumanising by the authorities seems to be to dehumanise the authorities in return. In this there are hints of a distinctly black working-class humour but also the suggestion that each side’s view of the other was already partly formed before the strike and that the conflict of 1984-5 effectively acted in reinforcing those prejudices.

Stylistically, these early poems are the most simple. Their rhyme schemes are often elementary or non-existent. This lack of concern with form may perhaps reflect the urgency miners felt to record their thoughts as quickly as possible, unsure of how long the strike would last. This meant that it was not a question of when, but if, they would ever get another chance to write.<sup>15</sup> Repetition is the

<sup>12</sup> Searle, “Against All the Odds,” 85.

<sup>13</sup> Graham, *The Age of Sorrow*; Armitage, *The Price of Coal*; *Ode to a Pit*; and Briggs, *Coal Not Dole*, *Miners’ Strike Papers*.

<sup>14</sup> *Communities under Attack*, *Miners’ Strike Papers*.

<sup>15</sup> It may also reflect the educational background of many miners who left formal education at fourteen (or unofficially younger) and therefore may not have encountered much poetry. However, it is equally worth



most common device used in these opening poems to frame questions, reinforce statements and set out concerns in the manner of a poetic manifesto of beliefs and intentions. However, it also provides a sense of innocence, a naivety of events to come – an aspect of this poetry which hindsight makes all the more poignant.

As the strike developed so too did the strikers' writings, in both style and content. Concerns and awareness grew as a conclusion to the conflict began to seem a distant hope. Several miners highlight the historical significance of the strike in their writings but many go beyond this, using their literature as a means to communicate their vision of society, and their dreams and ambitions for an industry which must have a future if they and their communities are to survive. Throughout these poems the central image of coal appears again and again as a metaphor for people under pressure, whose compression, like fossils millions of years ago, has the potential to create large-scale energy and change:

Pressed by force  
and might  
Our energy will ignite the torch  
of change. (l.13-16)<sup>16</sup>

The unity of miners constitutes a focal theme throughout this archive. In the face of daunting opposition from the government, miners set about asserting their strength and faith in the protest movement. Their poetry is often instructional and inspirational, demanding action and solidarity (“pickets all unite” – l.4).<sup>17</sup> Dominant ideas include the unwavering nature of their strength as working men and their new discipline and determination in the face of a ruthless and organised response from the Thatcher regime. Several poems describe this unity as part of a process of growth and education, enforcing the need to stay committed in the long struggle ahead:

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noting that many miners during this period were widely read and that mining communities on the whole attained high levels of literacy.

<sup>16</sup> *Striking*, Miners' Strike Documents Folder.

<sup>17</sup> *Ledston Luck Picket's Songs*, Miners' Strike Documents Folder.

As the strike grows longer  
Our resolve grows stronger  
Maggie thought she'd starve us back  
But she couldn't be wronger

Though we wish we were earning  
Arthur's lads are not for turning  
Here's the lesson we are learning  
Unity is might. (1.7-16)<sup>18</sup>

Unity among strikers was nowhere more apparent than on the picket line. Although picketing played an important role in maintaining solidarity during the strike, it also provided a space and an opportunity to vocalise thoughts and feelings, perspectives on developments and hopes for the future. It equally functioned as an occasion for creative exchange, developing the song culture of the strike and allowing miners to meet, generate ideas and write together. Songs and poems from the picket lines constitute an effective chronicle of the strike's development, illustrating a very different reality, the miners' own version of the 'truth,' as part of the battle to contest the control of language and perception.

During the strike the power of language became linked inextricably to the question of ownership. Indeed, in this particular social conflict, language played a greater role than ever before in winning the battle of image and ideology. The manipulative use of language was one of the most effective weapons used by the media against miners and their families. The media's description of miners as "pit mobs" and "pit head thugs" as opposed to heroic working men suggests, according to Dave Douglas in *A Year in Our Lives*, that it was the public who were manipulated most effectively by the media, not the miners by Arthur Scargill.<sup>19</sup> The right for people to use their own language became a legal issue during the strike, typified by the media's inflammatory responses to the label 'scab.' Frustration at these restrictions led to a plethora of poems about 'scabs' in the

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas, *A Year in Our Lives*, 53.

context of both the strike and the way in which ‘scabs’ were seen as deserters from the working-class movement as a whole:

If tha knows what’s good for thee  
 Tha’ll ger ont neet bus back  
 Wiv eard about thee little talks  
 Wi Silver Birch on’t pach. (l.1-4)<sup>20</sup>

Poems such as this provide a sense of the long-term impact of ‘scabbing’ on friendships and families. The use of regional language suggests that the poem is a genuine emotional confession expressed in such a way that it implies an understanding of dialect and cultural terms. As a result of writing in dialect, miners effectively brought their own language to the forefront of the debate, celebrating their cause and both the primacy and the usefulness of regional dialect in reflecting this. Poems such as Bowler’s *Scabs Take Note* provide the reader with an alternative perspective on historical ‘fact’ and an invaluable, and hitherto untold, record of how miners responded to government counter-tactics during the strike.

In addition to providing a voice to those effectively ‘silenced’ by dominant authorities, poetry also functioned as a useful tool of expression for those doubly disadvantaged during the conflict by both their gender and their class. Although women were heavily involved in the strike, female perspective was a rare addition to published accounts of the conflict, as writers focused instead on political perspectives, tactics and ideological concerns. This may be one of the reasons why women turned to the pen to make their voices heard. Women’s poems provide the reader with a unique and lasting account of the reality experienced by women who participated in this monumental historical struggle.

A central concern for many female writers seems to be the desire to make sense of the change in female role brought about by

<sup>20</sup> Bowler, *Scabs Take Note*, Miners’ Strike Documents Folder. ‘Silver Birch,’ whose real name was Chris Butcher, was an anti-strike activist and miner who tried to persuade miners to return to work. For a detailed discussion of Silver Birch’s perspective on the conflict see Maguire, “No Regrets,” 34.

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the strike. To illustrate the magnitude of this change, writers often establish oppositions within their poetry between traditional female pastimes and their new post-strike concerns. One poem which typifies the need to understand the impact of this change is *Kim* by Jean Gittins:

I can't understand what has happened to Kim  
There's been such a terrible change  
When I think of how that girl acted before  
I can't understand such a change

A beautiful hand with the pastry she had  
Her sponge cakes were lovely and light  
But, now it's all muesli, and yoghurt, and nuts  
While she's out at meetings each night

We could have gone on, for the rest of our lives  
Never knowing, just what she was like  
And she'd have been trapped in our image of her  
If it hadn't been for the strike.<sup>21</sup>

Here, home-life and working-class culture are put in direct competition with an active, participatory social life and new 'trendy' health foods; a process of transition which the poem seems to suggest was not borne out of, but speeded up by, the strike. This conflict undoubtedly shaped the lives of the women who lived through it. They learnt the capacity for personal growth in a collective movement, and found a place in society as a result of self-discovery and education. However, it is a new-found respect for themselves which is documented as most significant by several women:

"Mummy, what did you do in the strike?"  
I found pride child  
I found pride. (l.19-21)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> "Kim," in Gittins, *Striking Stuff*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> *Mummy, What Did You Do in the Strike?*

Female poetry suggests that the strike acted as a catalyst for this process of change, accelerating its impact on everyday life as a result of necessity. However, these poems are equally forceful in their assertion that women's main concern during the strike was not the promotion of their rights, but the strike itself. Women assert through their poetry that they are the emotional support structure of the strike, and that therefore to turn the struggle into one concerning feminism will inevitably weaken their cause.

Women's writings also record key events in the female support group movement and the effect these organisations had on the lives of the women who participated in them. Women's groups provided a creative space independent of male opinion or direction, allowing women to gain first-hand experience of responding to and supporting large-scale industrial action but also giving them the chance to write, to discuss, and to develop a voice. Poems recalling and commemorating women's rallies and regular gatherings such as food-parcel days provide the reader with a lasting historical account of female contributions to the strike. However, accounts of personal events are just as fascinating. Several poems draw attention to individual plights which might otherwise have been lost as a result of a wider focus on the 'bigger picture' during the conflict. In 'Divided,' a miner's wife details the divisions in her family caused by the strike. Her husband and elder son work in the mine, but the fact that her youngest son is a member of the household cavalry causes friction between family members. The poem subtly sets out female pride and determination while providing a timely reminder for the reader of Thatcher's impact not only on the economy but also on social relations:

My family are miners  
 Standing tall with pride  
 Sadly we're divided  
 And tears I have to hide

My father, husband and youngest son  
 They're miners through and through  
 My eldest son chose differently  
 A uniform of blue

No he's not a copper  
That is not his scene  
He is in the Household Cavalry  
An escort to our Queen

From Barnsley to Knightsbridge  
In one giant stride  
Forgetting his roots  
While in London he rides

Son against father  
Brother against brother  
I'm in the middle  
As a wife and mother

Maggie doesn't understand  
She doesn't feel our pain  
It's miners and their families  
That have to take the strain

Oh Iron Lady with no heart  
Uncaring grocer's daughter  
This mining blood that's in our veins  
Is much thicker than water. (1.5-28)<sup>23</sup>

The message of this poem, like many other poems from the strike, is clear – mining women possess a remarkable strength of solidarity and collectivism, and to confront this is to be doomed to failure.

As the strike progressed and women became more involved in direct action their writings reflected these new experiences. Women's strike songs set out their fighting spirit and good humour in an effective advertisement for their cause. These songs reflect the growing protest culture within society during this period and the increased role women played in this movement. In particular, women made use of established tunes in their protest songs. This made their

<sup>23</sup> North Yorkshire Women against Pit Closures, *Strike 1984-5*, 24.

singing incredibly effective as people instantly recognised the tune and tried to identify its changed lyrics. The song below, inspired by the 'Conga,' was popular at rallies and demonstrations, encouraging others to join in or at the very least hum along in support of the miners' cause:

We've come down here from Yorkshire  
We're marching down here from Yorkshire  
It's a fact you see  
We'll fight the NCB  
They're trying to starve us back now  
Cos money we don't have now  
They won't succeed  
We're a tough breed.<sup>24</sup>

Poetry and songs provided women with the space necessary to articulate their thoughts and feelings, a space which society denied them. As one female striker claimed:

Trying to explain what it was like to people who weren't active in the strike was very difficult because most of the time I just wasn't believed. The TV and the press were pouring out endless rubbish, yet apparently they had more credibility than I did.<sup>25</sup>

As a result of women's increased role in the events of 1984-5, their writings from this period stand apart, reflecting not only their experiences and opinions but also the growth of female and literary possibility which occurred as a result of the strike.

Although women account for many lost voices in the history of this conflict, the literature produced by children during the strike has also been overlooked by published accounts. It is no exaggeration to claim that the effects of being a child during the strike were, for many, life-changing. Adults, looking back on the strike they experienced as a child, strongly affirm that it made them who they are today, providing them with vivid memories for years to come. During

<sup>24</sup> *The Yorkshire Song*, Miners' Strike Papers.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Scanlon, *Surviving the Blues*, 38.

the strike there was a great deal of sentimentality about children, but their writings clearly show they possessed their own indomitable fighting spirit. During 1984-5 the press concentrated almost exclusively on adult perspectives, but children's writings show that they were equally immersed in discourses concerning the conflict. This is one of the many reasons why the literature produced by children and young people during this period is so significant.

Participation was key to children's understanding, and as a direct result of their active involvement in the strike they grew to know more about the conflict. The political discussions which became a regular feature of family life undoubtedly rubbed off on inquisitive young minds:

It's made me more aware of politics. A while ago I would have rather turned to a Beano or watch Playschool than sit and listen to 'her' [Thatcher].<sup>26</sup>

This symbolic shift away from traditionally 'childish' texts and media programming opened young children to new dialogues and images. Their poems detail a political knowledge of the strike which is far more sophisticated than one could detect in much children's poetry which preceded or followed these works. Children's strike-writings commonly illustrate an appreciation of key issues such as the 'right to work' while expressing personal opinions on political developments:

As children we have learnt  
A great deal from the strike  
Not only about the working class  
But about our working right. (1.9-12)<sup>27</sup>

Children's poems also address personal ramifications of the strike, such as their joy at their fathers being around during the day for the first time in memory. Children equally felt the benefits of the growing popularity of the mining profession – being a miner's child was no longer something to be ashamed of. Thanks to popular support

<sup>26</sup> Hoyles, *More Valuable than Gold*, 44.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholls, *Pride of a Miner's Daughter*, Miners' Strike Documents Folder.



glamorising the profession and making heroes out of the average dad, miners' children came to see their label not as a stigma, but something to be proud of.

However, tales of plight and need are just as common in children's writings and although most young authors attempt to mask this with a brave assertion of their eventual victory, some tales are too terrible to ignore. In one poem, a little girl tells of her daily humiliation at the hands of her headmaster. As her parents were both on strike, they could not afford the black leather lace-ups required by her school uniform. Instead, the little girl wore sandals throughout the winter months. Every day during assembly she was forced to stand up in front of the whole school and tell her headmaster why her parents made her wear those shoes and how this made her feel about the strike. This victimisation continued for three months until, to her "delight" (l.17), she found an old pair of men's black leather lace-ups, several sizes too large, in a local jumble sale.<sup>28</sup> Children's writings act as a reminder that despite the rapid process of growth children underwent in the strike, they remained children – but children whose experiences during this conflict would shape their social and political beliefs for years to come.

The writings of miners, their families and their communities provide us with unique and valuable alternative perspectives on the conflict of 1984-5. Poems and songs produced by those who experienced the strike, whether as children or as adults, display a real sense of inter-generational pride and belief in the right to maintain their way of life. What is most apparent about strikers' poems is their vehement wish that the strike should never be glamorised. Unlike the romantic, fictional accounts written by established authors after the event, writings from those involved show gritty realism and honesty. Their method of relating personal experiences to the wider issues of the day ultimately proved a useful way for writers from mining communities to consider what they wanted to say. Although writings from the coalfields were criticised for being 'defeatist' in the later stages of the strike, this was countered by writers such as Martin Walker who explained to his readership that: "All I can say in answer

<sup>28</sup> Ellie, *Winter 1984*, Miners' Strike Documents Folder.

to this is that I tried to explain as honestly as possible what happened.”<sup>29</sup> In choosing not to romanticise or fictionalise their desperate situation, these writers produced a permanent account of *their* reality of one of the greatest industrial disputes in British history. Rather than encouraging the reader to submit to sweeping historical statements, the archive presents us with a multiplicity of histories, an almost deafening resurgence of voices from the past which enable the modern reader to produce manifold readings of a single historical event.

The archive would suggest that the 1984-5 conflict was a school of writing – with poetry appearing to be the arena overwhelming chosen by miners to confront, head-on, the struggle to impose their definition and version of events. Published fictions and non-fictions which offer versions of the ‘truth’ about the strike tend to employ the label ‘authentic’ to defend their position, implying that their version of history is traditional, local, honest and truthful. The territoriality of the authentic expressed in these texts not only implies authority but also works to exclude the many and complex voices of those who were actually there. This new archive of strike poetry highlights the written word as a potential site for this struggle over the legitimacy of the *authority* of reality, encouraging readers to confront and acknowledge those denied the authority of authorship – the right to communicate their perspectives on conflict – and to question the significance of the forms in which perspectives are recorded.

The importance of recognising and valuing perspectives and representations, concepts and understandings of conflict, of illuminating unseen works and projecting unheard voices, is perhaps best summed up by Terry Eagleton who claims in *After Theory* that:

In retrieving what orthodox culture has pushed to the margins, cultural studies has done vital work. Margins can be unspeakably painful places to be, and there are few more honourable tasks

<sup>29</sup> Walker, *A Turn of the Screw*, 1.

for students of culture than to help create a space in which the dumped and disregarded can find a tongue.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that it has taken more than two decades for these perspectives to be ‘illuminated,’ analysed and added to the existing body of literature on the strike means that several generations have become immersed in a version of history which omits the perspectives of arguably the most important figures – those actually involved in the conflict. As Jeremy Corbyn, now MP for Islington North but previously a trade union organiser for the National Union of Public Employees, said in *The Morning Star* in 2004:

If only the coverage now given to personal accounts of the strike and its hardships had been allowed ... in 1984-5. People ... seem to think that history is safe – it’s only the present that’s not.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Eagleton, *After Theory*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Corbyn, “Miners’ Strike,” 8.

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