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The Closure of Michael Colliery in 1967 and the Politics of Deindustrialization in Scotland

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Abstract

Michael Colliery in east Fife was the largest National Coal Board (NCB) unit in Scotland when it closed in 1967, following a disastrous fire which killed nine miners. The NCB, operating within the constraints of the Labour government's policy framework, decided not to invest in Michael's recovery, although this would have secured profitable production within five years and access to thirty-plus years of coal reserves. This outcome, which had major local economic implications, demonstrates that deindustrialization is a willed and highly politicized process. The Labour government ignored workforce entreaties to over-ride the NCB's decision and invest to bring the pit back into production, but made significant localized adjustments to regional policy that within a year attracted a major employer to the area, the Distillers Company Limited. The article relates the closure to moral economy arguments about deindustrialization. It shows that coal closures in the 1960s, while actually more extensive than those of the 1980s, were managed very differently, with attention to the interests of the workers and communities affected, and an emphasis on cultivating alternative industrial employment.

Key words: coal closures; deindustrialization; Labour government; moral economy

On 9 September 1967, at approximately 3.30 a.m., a major fire developed 300 fathoms below the ground at Michael Colliery in East Wemyss, on the south-east coast of Fife. Nine

men were killed, asphyxiated by gases released in the fire. Another 302 escaped, despite the ferocity of the heat and the smoke. Rescuers recovered six of the dead, but the other three were entombed behind a series of seals that were the only means of containing the fire. Trade union representatives successfully pressed the government to appoint a Public Inquiry.¹ This was chaired by Henry Stephenson, H. M. Chief Inspector of Mines and Quarries, and found that the fire had been caused by spontaneous combustion of coal, which ignited polyurethane insulation lining on a roadway in the mine, and then a conveyor belt within that roadway. The fire spread through other flammables, including coal and timber. Stephenson recommended that polyurethane should not be used as insulation underground, and that all miners be fitted with self-rescuing breathing equipment, a central union demand in the disaster's aftermath.² Stephenson characterized the escape of 302 men as a remarkable collective feat of courage, discipline and responsibility.³

Michael was not the worst coal industry disaster in Scotland after 1945. At Knockshinnoch in east Ayrshire thirteen men died in 1950, buried when a peat valley collapsed into the mine, although 116 of their comrades were saved, and in 1959 at Auchengeich in Lanarkshire forty-seven miners were killed by a catastrophic fire.⁴ Both Knockshinnoch and Auchengeich continued operating after their fatal accidents, but the

¹ The National Archives (hereafter TNA), POWE 52/202, Lawrence Daly, National Union of Mineworkers Scottish Area (hereafter NUMSA) General Secretary, to Ray Gunter, Minister of Labour, 19 September 1967.

² *Scottish Miner*, October 1967, 1.

³ Ministry of Power, *Fire at Michael Colliery, Fife. Report on the causes of, and circumstances attending, the fire which occurred at Michael Colliery, Fife, on 9th September 1967*, by H. S. Stephenson, H. M. Chief Inspector of Mines and Quarries, Cmnd. 3657 (HMSO, 1968), 2, 10, 16-17.

⁴ Miles K, Oglethorpe, *Scottish Collieries. An Inventory of the Scottish Coal Industry in the Nationalised Era* (Edinburgh, 2006), 70-1, 83-4, 170-1.

human disaster at Michael was followed by the dire economic and social consequence of closure, announced by the National Coal Board (NCB) on 21 November.⁵ Michael was the largest colliery in Scotland, producing 5-6 per cent of the NCB's annual Scottish output. Its workforce of 2,184 men amounted to a twentieth of NCB manpower in Scotland and a fifth of the local employment exchange area's insured adult male population.⁶ Michael's annual wage bill was reckoned by Labour mining MPs to be around £3 million, and its closure would have significant multiplier effects as local supply firms paid out roughly the same to their employees.⁷

The social costs of closure were also emphasized by mining union officials. Michael McGahey, President of the National Union of Mineworkers Scottish Area (NUMSA), asked Willie Ross, Secretary of State for Scotland in Harold Wilson's Labour government, to contemplate the damaging long-term effects of 'redundancy and emigration' in communities across east Fife.⁸ The NUMSA was pushing the government to reverse the closure by financing Michael's rehabilitation as a coal producer. NCB officials in Scotland estimated that this would cost £4 million, securing 1,500 jobs, and wanted it to happen. But NCB officials in London reckoned the cost of recovery at £5 million, and characterized this as commercially-prohibitive. The London officials hinted to union representatives that Michael would only be saved if the government provided the necessary investment. Lawrence Daly,

⁵ National Records of Scotland (hereafter NRS), CB 260/14/1, NCB, Michael Colliery, Press Statement, 11.30 a.m., 21 November 1967.

⁶ NRS, SEP 4/2332, Board of Trade Office for Scotland, 'Note on the Leven and Methil Employment Exchange Area and the Surrounding Travel to Work Area', 13 September 1967.

⁷ NRS, SEP 4/2334, Michael Colliery, Note of a Meeting held in Dover House on Thursday 4th January 1968.

⁸ NRS, SEP 4/2336, Michael McGahey to Willie Ross, 16 January 1968.

NUMSA General Secretary, conveyed this intelligence to Ross,⁹ but the possibility was scotched by Richard Marsh, Minister of Power. According to Tam Dalyell, a Labour MP with many miners in his West Lothian constituency, Marsh disliked coal mining, appalled by its human costs, and so promoted other forms of energy provision.¹⁰ He offered no succour to Michael, telling Ross that the government had no role in managing or funding individual pits. These were matters entirely for the NCB.¹¹ Marsh made the same point to a delegation from the Scottish Trades Union Congress.¹² This was disingenuous, for his Ministry had just published *Fuel Policy*, a White Paper calling for an accelerated diversification of energy provision in the UK, with coal's market share to fall from 58 per cent in 1966 to 34 per cent in 1975, and employment more than halved, from 425,000 to 195,000.¹³ These targets were predicated on a highly optimistic reading of future Middle East politics and oil prices, according to senior NCB managers. Writing before the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict and the massive oil price increase, which reinvigorated demand for coal, Alf Robens, the Board's Chairman, predicted that his industry's output would outstrip the Ministry of Power's projected estimates.¹⁴ *Fuel Policy* nevertheless shaped NCB thinking in 1967: Robens decreed that the market for Scottish coal in Scotland could be met without Michael; and

⁹ NRS, SEP 4/2333, hand-written note of phone call taken by Secretary of State (Willie Ross) from Lawrence Daly, NUM General Secretary, 11 December 1967.

¹⁰ Tam Dalyell, 'Dick Marsh', in Greg Rosen (ed.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (London, 2001), 381-3.

¹¹ NRS, SEP 4/2333, Richard Marsh to Willie Ross, 13 November 1967, and Miss M. J. Alexander, Scottish Office Regional Development Division, to J. Cormack, Private Secretary, Scottish Office, 15 November 1967.

¹² TNA, POWE 52/277, Scottish TUC and Fuel Policy: Note of a Meeting held in Minister's room at Thames House South, Millbank, on Friday, 15 December, 1967.

¹³ Ministry of Power, *Fuel Policy*, Cmnd. 3428 (HMSO, 1967), 36, 71.

¹⁴ Alf Robens, *Ten Year Stint* (London, 1972), 206-33.

Ronald Parker, the Scottish Divisional Chairman, explicitly referred to the White Paper when explaining the closure to union officials.¹⁵

The NCB's position was understandable. Cost pressures had been bearing down on the industry for more than a decade by 1967, as oil, gas and nuclear energy emerged as rivals. In the decade from 1960 coal's share of the expanding electricity generation market fell from 73.7 to 46.6 per cent, and there was absolute as well as relative decline, with total production falling roughly from 200 million to 150 million tonnes.¹⁶ Other aspects of macro-policy reinforced Michael's negative prospects. Of particular relevance was the prevailing emphasis on economic growth, which emerged in the late 1950s.¹⁷ This privileged economic activities promising quicker growth, especially assembly goods manufacturing. The contraction of coal was therefore an explicit aim of Conservative and Labour government policy in the 1960s. In Scotland growth was seen as particularly contingent on 'rebalancing' the economy, which meant reducing the historical dependence on labour-intensive and lower-productivity 'heavy' industries, starting with coal.¹⁸

The government's approach to nationalization also influenced the NCB's decision to close Michael. The Conservative government in 1961 had tightened financial constraints on nationalized industries and services, required to cover costs over a five-year period.¹⁹ The Labour government contemplated a greater emphasis on economic than financial issues,

¹⁵ NRS, CB 360/13/14/5, Minute of Meeting on Michael Colliery, 6 December 1967.

¹⁶ W. Ashworth, *The History of the British Coal Industry, Volume 5, 1946-1982: the nationalised industry* (Oxford, 1986), 38-9, 678-9.

¹⁷ Nick Tiratsoo and Jim Tomlinson, *The Conservatives and Industrial Efficiency, 1951-64* (London, 1998), 29-33.

¹⁸ *The Scottish Economy, 1965 to 1970. A Plan for Expansion*, Cmnd. 2864 (HMSO, 1966).

¹⁹ *The Financial and Economic Obligations of the Nationalised Industries*, Cmnd. 1337 (HMSO, 1961).

and considered the introduction of marginal cost pricing.²⁰ But a White Paper published on 2 November 1967,²¹ three weeks before the NCB announced the closure of Michael, reiterated the inherited focus on financial targets.²² This reinforced the trend in economic policy more generally towards moving labour from 'traditional' sectors to assembly goods. This, in turn, was consolidated by adjustments in regional policy, the various incentives for businesses to locate in areas of new population or older urban settlements exhibiting slower growth.²³ Policy in this area had been modified in the early 1960s, in Scotland partly under the pressure of assembly goods manufacturers, who sought encouragement for territorial 'growth points' rather than support for ameliorating unemployment in shrinking or depressed districts.²⁴ Of importance here was the 1961 Toothill Report, authored by the Chairman of Ferranti Scotland,²⁵ which influenced regional policy thinking within the Scottish Office for the next ten years at least.²⁶ The 1964-70 Labour governments generally accepted this, expanding the locus of regional policy from development districts to development areas, although there was a slight shift back towards managing

²⁰ Jim Tomlinson, *The Labour Governments, 1964-70. Volume 3, Economic Policy* (Manchester, 2004), 155-67.

²¹ 'Investing £4.6 millions a day', *The Guardian*, 3 November 1967, 10.

²² *Nationalised Industries: A Review of Economic and Financial Objectives*, Cmnd. 3437 (HMSO, 1967).

²³ Peter Scott, 'Regional development and policy', in Roderick Floud and Paul Johnson (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain. Volume III, Structural Change and Growth, 1939-2000* (Cambridge, 2004), 332-67.

²⁴ John Foster, 'The Twentieth Century, 1914-1979', in R. A. Houston and W. W. J. Knox (eds), *The New Penguin History of Scotland* (London, 2001), 467-9.

²⁵ Committee of Inquiry appointed by the Scottish Council (Development and Industry) under the Chairmanship of J. N. Toothill, *Report on the Scottish Economy* (Edinburgh, 1961).

²⁶ Jim Phillips, *The Industrial Politics of Devolution. Scotland in the 1960s and 1970s* (Manchester, 2008), 19-45.

unemployment as it worsened in 1967.²⁷ This would be reflected in the government's approach to Michael, endorsing its closure but seeking to stimulate compensatory employment in other sectors through localized regional policy adjustments.

The remainder of the analysis is structured in two parts. Longer-term deindustrialization in the Scottish coalfields after 1945 is explored first, and Michael's position in the coal industry and the east Fife economy delineated. The politics of the colliery's closure are then examined. The analysis, to reiterate, is of the politicized decision to end mining at Michael, setting aside the alternative path of investment in an important community resource providing up to 1,500 jobs in an area of above-average unemployment. For this reason the discussion leans heavily on NCB and government records, where the anatomy of the closure decision is revealed.

Deindustrialization and the east Fife coalfield, 1947-67

The ending of production at Michael illuminates the chronology and politicized nature of industrial closures in post-1945 Britain. Jonathan Meades, the English cultural commentator, positioned deindustrialization as a major theme in his television history of Scotland, *Off-Kilter*, originally broadcast in 2009. In Episode Two of this trilogy, 'The Football Pools Towns of Scotland', Meades visited Fife. Standing in a decommissioned power station in Methil, four miles from the site of Michael, Meades spoke about the 'high modernism' of its design,

²⁷ Tomlinson, *Economic Policy*, 85-7.

from the mid-twentieth century, when ‘there was coal mining and there was industry that depended on coal mining, and there was hope’. Such industry disappeared in the closing decades of the twentieth century or rather, he emphasized, it ‘was made to disappear’, the deliberate consequence of economic policy, guided by Margaret Thatcher, Conservative Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, and her various allies in government, business and society.²⁸

Meades was not alone in associating deindustrialization in Scotland – and the UK more broadly – with Thatcherism.²⁹ In much of the literature there is emphasis on how industrial closures were the consequence of the Thatcher governments’ policies, and the severe economic and social consequences for localities structured around industry. The coalfields were especially affected, with the year-long strike of 1984-5 an unsuccessful attempt to prevent a programme of pit closures, directed by the NCB but clearly within the terms of Conservative government policy. The subsequent loss of employment and income hastened the ‘oblivion’ of many coalfield communities, argues Owen Jones, whose discussion of the marginalization of the working class in contemporary Britain embodies what might be termed a ‘catastrophist’ analysis of deindustrialization,³⁰ emphasizing its

²⁸ Jonathan Meades, *Off-Kilter*, ‘The Football Pools Towns of Scotland’, originally broadcast BBC 4, 9 p.m., 23 September 2009.

²⁹ T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation, 1700-2000* (London, 1999), 591-9; Richard Finlay, *Modern Scotland, 1914-2000* (London, 2004), 341-51; David Hall, *Working Lives. The forgotten voices of Britain’s post-war working class* (London, 2012), 1-10, 327, 359-61 373; Christopher Harvie, *No Gods and Precious Few Heroes: Twentieth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1998), 164; Arthur Marwick, *A History of the Modern British Isles, 1914-1999* (Oxford, 1999), 290-4; Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People’s Peace: British History, 1945-1990* (Oxford, 1992), 445-9, 466-7.

³⁰ Owen Jones, *Chavs. The Demonization of the Working Class* (London, 2012), 35-7, 48-9, 54-5, 188-9.

sudden and rapid dimensions. There were clearly major losses of industrial employment in the 1980s, but deindustrialization in Britain preceded Thatcherism. It was also an international phenomenon, experienced by all OECD countries in the final third of the twentieth century, with substantially ambiguous causes, characteristics and consequences.³¹ Hence the importance of exploring developments across the twentieth century, as a growing body of scholarship on the USA and Canada demonstrates.³² Deindustrialization in Scotland, while escalating in the 1980s, evolved gradually from the middle decades of the twentieth century.³³

The phrase used by Meades, 'made to disappear', is nevertheless apposite, highlighting agency and the role of politicians, employers and investors. As Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison wrote in 1982, analysing manufacturing closures in the USA, 'deindustrialization does not just happen'.³⁴ The case of the Scottish coalfields demonstrates the deliberately managed nature of industrial contraction, which developed from the late

³¹ Ha-Joon Chang, *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism* (London, 2010), 88-101.

³² Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (New York, 2001); Steven High, *Industrial Sunset. The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-1984* (Toronto, 2003); Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steel-town USA: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (Kansas, 2003).

³³ Ewen A. Cameron, *Impaled Upon A Thistle: Scotland Since 1880* (Edinburgh, 2010), 236-44; W. W. Knox, *Industrial Nation: Work, Culture and Society in Scotland, 1800-Present* (Edinburgh, 1999), 254-64; C. H. Lee, *Scotland and the United Kingdom: the economy and the Union in the twentieth century* (Manchester, 1995), 58-70; John MacInnes, 'The Deindustrialisation of Glasgow', *Scottish Affairs*, 11 (1995), 73-95; G. C. Peden, 'A New Scotland? The Economy', in T. M. Devine and Jenny Wormald (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Scottish History* (Oxford, 2012), 652-70; Andrew Perchard, "'Broken Men" and "Thatcher's Children": Memory and Legacy in Scotland's Coalfields', *International Labor and Working Class History*, 84 (2013), 78-98.

³⁴ Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America. Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York, 1982), 15.

1950s, although not in a linear way.³⁵ There were three distinct phases, following a post-1945 peak of employment in 1957: restructuring and radical shrinkage, between 1958 and 1967, when employment dropped from 81,000 to 32,000, and annual output fell from 19 million to 13.5 million tonnes; relative stabilization to 1977, when employment dipped to 21,000 and production to 10.5 million tonnes; and then accelerated contraction to 1987, with employment down to 6,000 and production to 2.5 million tonnes.³⁶ This experience was distinct rather than unique. Coal industry employment contracted across OECD countries from the 1960s to the 2000s, although in some cases – Germany, most notably – the rate of decline was slower than in Scotland. The ‘ending’ of the industry was also managed differently elsewhere. In France and Germany the earnings of miners made redundant in the final decades of closure were protected, with significant public investment programmes to generate alternative employment and economic activity in the coalfields.³⁷ In Scotland and the UK more broadly coalfield deindustrialization was managed carefully in the 1960s and 1970s, with communal economic security maintained via regional policy, but this approach was abandoned from the 1980s onwards. Engrained economic and social

³⁵ Jim Phillips, ‘Deindustrialization and the Moral Economy of the Scottish Coalfields’, *International Labor and Working Class History*, 84 (2013), 99-115.

³⁶ The annual employment and production data is from Oglethorpe, *Scottish Collieries*, 20.

³⁷ ‘France ends coal mining with tears but not a single protest’, *The Independent*, 24 April 2004, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/france-ends-coal-mining-with-tears-but-not-a-single-protest-561039.html>, accessed 24 October 2014; ‘End of an Industrial Era: Germany to Close its Coal Mines’, *Spiegel Online International*, 30 January 2007, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/end-of-an-industrial-era-germany-to-close-its-coal-mines-a-463172.html>, accessed 24 October 2014.

deprivation in the former coalfields of Scotland, England and Wales in the 2010s is the result.³⁸

The phased nature of coalfield deindustrialization in Scotland was shaped by four connected factors: rising cost pressures facing the coal industry, with mechanization and industrial concentration from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s; the growth of alternative industrial employment, mainly in the 1960s; the miners' 'militant' political response to the initial phase, resisting further closures from the late 1960s to the 1970s; and then the re-assertion of managerial authority in a much changed political and industrial environment in the early 1980s, which weakened labour's capacity to resist a new wave of contraction. The process was mediated by the moral economy of the Scottish coalfields. This was distinct from other moral economy types identified in recent literature. Tomlinson, for instance, has shown that policy-makers in the 1950s and 1960s, guiding capital and labour into higher added value and export-based manufacturing industries, framed their priorities in moral terms. Workers' rights to economic security were balanced against their obligations to accept employment in more profitable sectors.³⁹ Marquand has identified a succession of predominant moral economy models over time, including a mid-twentieth century 'solidaristic' variant, not dissimilar to Tomlinson's, which was shared by social democratic and middle way Conservative policy-makers, but superseded from the 1980s by the

³⁸ Mike Foden, Steve Fothergill and Tony Gore, *The State of the Coalfields: economic and social conditions in the former mining communities of England, Scotland and Wales* (Coalfields Regeneration Trust and Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, June 2014).

³⁹ Jim Tomlinson, 'Reinventing the "moral economy" in post-war Britain', *Historical Research*, 84 (2011), 350-73.

contemporary 'market fundamentalist' approach that became embedded in the Thatcher years.⁴⁰

The Tomlinson and Marquand models were broadly articulated by political, social and intellectual elites. The coalfield moral economy, by comparison, emerged 'from below'. In this respect it resembles Thompson's famous moral economy, based on the customs and expectations of the English plebeian crowd, which developed from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and shaped collective action against profit-seeking employers and traders.⁴¹ The coalfield moral economy evolved over a shorter time period, shaped by popular memories of inter-war struggles and the redistribution of wealth and esteem from middle to working class that applied generally in Britain during and after the Second World War.⁴² Nationalization in 1947 further stimulated moral economy thinking, partly because of the recurrent mismatch between structure and experience. There was joint industrial bargaining and consultation, but the influence enjoyed by workers and their union representatives was limited in the 1950s, especially in the context of accelerating pit closures and job losses. A crucial episode in Scotland was the NCB announcement in June 1959 that Devon Colliery in Alloa would close. The 653 workers were to be redeployed at neighbouring pits but refused. Many of their number had recently transferred to Devon after the closure of mines in Lanarkshire, and viewed the situation as doubly unjust.⁴³ The Devon men's disquiet was shared by the 25,000 miners across Alloa, Stirlingshire and Fife

⁴⁰ D. Marquand, *Mammon's Kingdom. An Essay on Britain, Now* (Allen Lane, 2014), *passim*.

⁴¹ E. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present* 50 (1971), pp. 76–136.

⁴² R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 161.

⁴³ George Bolton, Interview with Willie Thompson, May 1986; copy in author's possession.

who joined an unofficial strike to protest against the pit's closure.⁴⁴ This continued for several days and shocked union leaders as well as NCB officials. Abe Moffat, NUMSA President, was forced to intervene, securing an end to the strike with a promise from the NCB of new talks about the pit's future.⁴⁵ Devon was closed, but not until March 1960, and this delay allowed the workforce to be redeployed locally, without redundancies.⁴⁶

This crisis and its outcome illuminated the terms of the moral economy approach that was subsequently applied to coalfield deindustrialization. Two items were emphasized: changes to work organization, including pit closures and job losses, had to be negotiated by the NCB with union representatives; and closures would only be acceptable where the economic security of the men affected was preserved, whether by transfer to other pits, or through the availability of comparably well-paid jobs in other industrial sectors.⁴⁷ The moral economy was contested strenuously by the NCB, particularly in the early 1960s as mechanization gathered pace in the Scottish coalfields, although some closures were opposed by local managers, seeking to resist centralizing NCB Scottish Divisional leadership, as well as worker representatives.⁴⁸ From the mid-1960s, however, the moral case for

⁴⁴ '27 Scottish pits now idle, *The Guardian*, 25 June 1959, p. 16; 'Fords agree to talks with ETU', *The Guardian*, 27 June 1959, p. 2.

⁴⁵ National Mining Museum of Scotland (hereafter NMMS), National Union of Mineworkers Scottish Area (hereafter NUMSA), Executive Committee (hereafter EC), 29 June 1959.

⁴⁶ NRS, CB 276/14, L. R. Milligan, Industrial Relations Director, National Coal Board Scottish Division (NCBSD), to K. G. Smith, Secretary, NCBSD, 17 June 1959, and William Summers, Alloa Area General Manager, NCBSD, to K. G. Smith, Secretary, NCBSD, 15 March 1960; NMMS, NUMSA, EC, 21 March 1960.

⁴⁷ Phillips, 'Deindustrialization and the Moral Economy'.

⁴⁸ Andrew Perchard, *The Mine Management Professions in the Twentieth-Century Scottish Coal Mining Industry* (Lampeter and Lewiston, 2007), 216-64.

communal security was made more assertively and effectively by a new generation of union officials. Chief among these were McGahey and Daly, voted onto the NUMSA executive in 1958 and 1962 respectively. Daly was then elected NUMSA General Secretary in 1965 and McGahey NUMSA President in 1967, just months before the Michael disaster. Through opposition to deindustrialization and advocacy of significant improvements to mining wages they earned reputations beyond Scotland too, Daly being elected NUM General Secretary in 1968 and McGahey NUM Vice-President in 1972.⁴⁹ This new generation of NUMSA officials succeeded in imposing their moral economy imperatives. The NCB was pressed, for example, to secure through negotiation with government and the electricity-generating authority in Scotland the establishment of large coal-fired power stations, at Kincardine, Longannet and Cockenzie, which stabilized employment in the central and eastern coalfields.⁵⁰ Moral economy arguments, it should be noted, influenced the management of deindustrialization more broadly within the NCB. Ashworth, the industry's 'official' historian, showed that with closures the NCB recognised an 'obligation to deal fairly with those whose livelihood was involved'. This meant lengthy advance warning and provision for alternative employment, even although closures in the main were concentrated in areas of relatively high joblessness in UK terms,⁵¹ such as central Scotland. The NCB's attempt – under pressure from union representatives – to balance the pursuit of efficiency with a form of

⁴⁹ John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'McGahey, Michael (Mick), (1925-1999)', in Keith Gildart and David Howell (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography. Volume XIII* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2010), 242-51; Jean McCrindle, 'Lawrence Daly: Obituary', *The Guardian*, 30 May 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/may/30/obituary-lawrence-daly>, accessed 24 October 2014.

⁵⁰ Robert S. Halliday, *The Disappearing Scottish Colliery* (Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh, 1990), 142-54.

⁵¹ Ashworth, *British Coal Industry*, 258.

social justice lends credence to Tomlinson's observation that nationalized industries contributed to the 'social democratising' of Britain after 1945. With high levels of union density, they were responsible and even progressive employers, enabling radical economic structural change with minimal human cost in the 1950s and 1960s, as hundreds of thousands of workers moved into private sector manufacturing and services. In this important sense nationalization was a success, and not the 'failed experiment' which appears in historical accounts focusing more narrowly on economic 'performance'.⁵²

These employment trends, shaped by moral economy arguments, were exemplified by developments in east Fife, at least until Michael's closure. At nationalization in 1947 there were twelve pits in east Fife, clustered between the towns of Kirkcaldy and Buckhaven. Several were closed shortly afterwards, but employment was stable, peaking in 1957 at the largest three: Michael, with 3,353 workers; Wellesley in Buckhaven, with 2,603; and Lochhead in Coaltown of Wemyss, with 841.⁵³ At Michael the pre-nationalization Wemyss Coal Company had operated two shafts and workings, known as No. 2 and No. 3, the former established before the First World War, and the latter constructed in the 1920s, at a depth of 300 fathoms. From 1949 to 1963 the NCB deepened No. 2 shaft and workings to 430 fathoms.⁵⁴ This was the area that 'survived' the fire in September 1967 to the extent that its rehabilitation was advocated by NCB officials in Scotland.⁵⁵

⁵² Leslie Hannah, 'A failed experiment: the state ownership of industry', in Floud and Johnson, *Cambridge Economic History*, 84-111; Jim Tomlinson, 'A "failed experiment"? Public Ownership and the Narratives of Post-war Britain', *Labour History Review*, 73 (2008), 199-214.

⁵³ Employment data from Oglethorpe, *Scottish Collieries*, 149, 153, 161.

⁵⁴ Guthrie Hutton, *Fife. The Mining Kingdom* (Stenlake, Ayrshire, 1999), 89-90.

⁵⁵ NRS, CB 360/21/1, NCB, Scottish North Area (hereafter SNA), Michael Colliery: Brief Report on Future Prospects, 18 September 1967.

Michael's development from 1949 was part of the broader NCB restructuring process, which in east Fife included two new pits: Rothes and Seafield. Rothes was the industrial core of Glenrothes, one of five New Towns established in Scotland after 1945 to relieve housing pressures in Glasgow.⁵⁶ Regional incentives, being multiplied generally across the 1960s,⁵⁷ persuaded numerous industrial enterprises to move to Glenrothes, including several major US firms, such as Burroughs Machines, the computer manufacturer which from 1971 ran a factory built at a cost to the UK government of £4 million. This was close to the sum estimated in 1967 as enabling Michael's rehabilitation, to employ 1,500 men. Burroughs promised to employ just 1,000 workers,⁵⁸ although never engaged more than 500, before closing in 1982.⁵⁹ This indicates how choices were exercised by policy-makers: Burroughs promised greater added economic value than Michael, and was a closer fit with the government's aim of securing the continued expansion of Glenrothes through industrial employment growth. In this connection the Board of Trade estimated in September 1967 that 1,065 workers were travelling to the New Town on a daily basis from Michael's employment exchange area, Leven and Methil. Of these 425 were men,⁶⁰ underlining the extent of job opportunities for women in Glenrothes. For both sexes these new

⁵⁶ David Cowling, *An Essay For Today: the Scottish New Towns, 1947 to 1997* (Edinburgh, 1997).

⁵⁷ Scott, 'Regional development', 352-3.

⁵⁸ NRS, SEP 4/57, Regional Development Division, St. Andrew's House, Note for Lady Tweedsmuir's Visit to Glenrothes on 2 March 1971.

⁵⁹ NRS, SEP 4/57, Glenrothes Development Corporation, Progress Report, Quarter Ended 31 December 1974, and SEP 4/3869, clipping, 'Burroughs closing Glenrothes, *The Scotsman*, 2 March 1982; *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 20, 24 March 1982, 376.

⁶⁰ NRS, SEP 4/2332, Board of Trade Office for Scotland, Note on the Leven and Methil Employment Exchange Area and the Surrounding Travel to Work Area, 13 September 1967.

jobs were predominantly in manufacturing: in 1971 roughly two-thirds of male jobs and over half of female jobs in the town were in industrial categories.⁶¹

Roths Colliery had opened in 1957, with a projected workforce of 2,500 and a life of a hundred years. Ian Terris, author of a lively mining memoir, was one of many who moved to the area, encouraged by these prospects, in his case from Lanarkshire. But Roths closed in 1962, troubled by geological problems and unusually heavy flooding, with employment peaking at 1,200. Terris later worked at Seafield, south of Kirkcaldy, where production commenced in 1966, and employment rapidly built up, peaking at 2,400 in 1970.⁶² This expansion ended production in central Fife, where six pits were closed between 1962 and 1966. These were not exhausted of reserves, but workforce representatives accepted that the industry's future would be more secure if the men transferred to Seafield or large pits in west Fife. This was the moral economy of the coalfield in operation: the changes were negotiated, and employment stability and continuity of earnings prioritized.⁶³

The same factors applied in the rundown of east Fife, specifically in the instance of Michael's neighbour, Wellesley, where the geology was difficult, and coal was produced at a loss every year from 1951. In productivity terms, however, Wellesley was still performing well in 1966-7 and local managers contemplated contraction but not closure, trimming the

⁶¹ General Registry Office, Edinburgh, *Census 1971 Scotland. Economic Activity: County Tables, Part II* (Edinburgh, 1975), Table 3.

⁶² Iain Terris, *Twenty Years Down the Mines* (Ochiltree, 2001), 44-54; Oglethorpe, *Scottish Collieries*, 157-9.

⁶³ NRS, CB 305/5/1, NCB Scottish Division Colliery Closures – Glenraig, Note of a meeting between representatives of the NCB and the NUM, 27 April 1966.

workforce from 1,200 to 750, and concentrating on easier reserves.⁶⁴ At this juncture, however, Scottish Divisional officials decided to treble employment at Seafield, from 780 in the spring of 1966 to a projected 2,600 by the summer of 1967.⁶⁵ Union representatives were persuaded to accept Wellesley's closure and the redeployment of its workers to build up Seafield,⁶⁶ although many also moved to Michael.⁶⁷ Seafield and Michael would continue as the core of NCB operations in east Fife, and Lochhead was also scheduled in the summer of 1967 for closure within twelve months. Events at Michael prolonged its life until March 1970, when most of its workers moved to Seafield, with the remainder bound for Frances, east of Kirkcaldy. This was another pre-nationalization pit that survived the 1960s because of Michael's closure.⁶⁸

Industrial restructuring increased the relative importance of Michael, although it experienced intermittent difficulties. In 1965 there was a production shortfall. NCB officials ascribed this to inefficient worker performance, while union representatives argued that managers were paying insufficient attention to machine maintenance and supply, and not attending or taking seriously the local joint industrial consultation committee. This, they claimed, had inhibited the efficient operation of coal-getting, and was an important

⁶⁴ NRS, CB 423/14/2, NCB Scottish Division, Fife/Alloa Area, Deputy Area General Manager to Area Production Manager, 24 November 1966.

⁶⁵ NRS, CB 305/5/1, NCB Scottish Division, 'Closure of Glenraig', no date, but presumed March 1966.

⁶⁶ NRS, CB 423/14/2, NCB Scottish Division, Fife/Alloa Area, Brief for senior officials of the NCB for the meeting to be held on 21 December 1966 to discuss the future of Wellesley Colliery; and CB 305/5/1, NCB Scottish Division, Fife/Alloa Area, Notes of the Special Consultative Meeting held on 21 December 1966 to discuss the future of Wellesley Colliery.

⁶⁷ NRS, CB 423/19/3, Wellesley Colliery, Offers of Alternative Employment.

⁶⁸ NRS, CB 346/5/5, NCB, SNA: Special Colliery Consultative Meeting at Lochhead Colliery, 19 August 1969.

transgression of the moral economy, which privileged management-worker dialogue.⁶⁹ But Michael remained one of the NCB's favoured fifty pits for development in 1967, with 'priority in recruitment, capital investment and managerial expertise',⁷⁰ and producing an annual average tonnage of 845,000, at an annual average profit of £445,000.⁷¹ Before the disaster NCB officials were projecting larger profits over thirty to forty years, with the enlargement of No. 3 pit operations at 430 fathoms to yield an annual average exceeding 900,000 tonnes.⁷² This optimism was shared, moreover, by the Ministry of Power officials preparing *Fuel Policy* for publication in 1967. Their private prognosis was that coal production in Scotland by 1980 would be concentrated almost entirely on four collieries feeding the giant power station at Longannet, at the junction of west Fife and Clackmannan. All other Scottish pits would be closed, apart from Michael.⁷³

So Michael in the summer of 1967 was a major industrial unit with a big future, and of vital economic significance to East Wemyss and neighbouring settlements. The connection between pit and locality is worth elaborating. It had been loosened by industrial restructuring, with some miners and their families moving from east to west Fife, and further beyond. The NCB helped, arranging visits to receiving collieries, for meetings with

⁶⁹ NRS, CB 360/29/2, Alex Moffat, NUMSA President, to R. W. Parker, Chairman, NCB Scottish Division, 23 September 1965.

⁷⁰ 'Six die, two saved in pit fire trap', *The Observer*, 10 September 1967, 1.

⁷¹ NRS, CB 360/21/1, NCB, SNA, Michael Colliery: Brief Report on Future Prospects, 18 September 1967.

⁷² NRS, CB 360/29/2, NCB, Scottish Division, Finance Department, 'Michael Reorganisation Project – Comparative Figures for 1970-71', no date but presumed 1965.

⁷³ TNA, POWE 52/113, Department for Economic Affairs, Working Group on Regional Implications of Fuel Policy and Natural Gas (RIFP). Possible Reductions in Employment Opportunities through Colliery Closures, Note by the Secretary, A. J. Surrey, 30 May 1967.

managers and union representatives, and tours of local authority housing.⁷⁴ But miners had strong local ties which weakened the effectiveness of the transfer schemes, especially longer distance programmes developed by the NCB in a broadly unsuccessful attempt to move large numbers of men from Scotland, Northumbria and Durham to Yorkshire and the east Midlands.⁷⁵ The bulk of redeployed Scottish miners from the late 1950s onwards therefore tended not to move home, but travel daily to their new pit, usually by NCB bus. Subsequent pit closures therefore had a different impact from those of the 1940s or the earlier 1950s. The localized intensity was diluted, with the workers affected typically drawn from a larger number of neighbouring communities. When Lochhead closed in March 1970 some 156 face workers sought redeployment. Twenty-six lived less than two miles away, in West Wemyss, Coaltown of Wemyss or East Wemyss; another ninety-three lived within four miles, in Buckhaven, Methil, Leven, Windygates and Kennoway to the east, or Dysart and Kirkcaldy to the west. Only roughly two in nine, the thirty-five men from Glenrothes, Cardenden, Markinch or Thornton, travelled more than five miles each day. So the community-embedded nature of the industry was weakening, but still visible, not least in the family connections observable in the names of the Lochhead men. These included J. and T. Christie, both of West Wemyss, D. and J. Penman, and H. and J. Reekie, all of Coaltown of Wemyss, and G. Rodger of East Wemyss, a relative, perhaps, of R. Rodger in Coaltown of Wemyss.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ NRS, CB 346/19/1, NCB, SNA, Industrial Relations Department, Pre-Transfer Visit to Solsgirth and Dollar Mines, Saturday 28 February 1970.

⁷⁵ Ashworth, *British Coal Industry*, 261-2.

⁷⁶ NRS, CB 346/5/5, NCB, SNA, Colliery Closure, Manpower Department Category: Face Worker, List of men given notice with addresses and dates of birth, no date, presumed January 1970.

The Closure of Michael

The mixture of neighbourhood connection and broader but bounded geographical community, evident at Lochhead in 1970, explains the intensity of the response in east Fife to the fire at Michael in 1967, with the accompanying threat of closure. Local anxieties were articulated immediately, with press reports that the pit would not re-open and 1,200 or more miners 'certain' to lose their jobs.⁷⁷ 'Bitterness and bewilderment are mounting in a Scots mining community suddenly thrust by disaster to the top of the national dole league', sketched the *Daily Record*, which positioned a local feudal figure, Captain Wemyss, as the villain. Wemyss had allegedly obstructed the sale of nearby land for alternative industrial employment,⁷⁸ and was a more politically convenient target for the Labour-supporting *Record* than the UK government, which responded slowly to the crisis. On 29 September McGahey and other members of the NUM National Executive met Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister, along with Marsh and Peter Shore, Secretary of State for Economic Affairs. The union delegation sought but did not receive an undertaking that the government would help the NCB financially to maintain the employment of Michael men who were unable to find other jobs.⁷⁹

The employment security of the workforce was obviously jeopardized, but NCB officials in Scotland were determined to preserve the pit. Ronald Parker, Scottish Divisional

⁷⁷ NRS, SEP 4/2332, clipping, *The Scotsman*, 14 September 1967.

⁷⁸ NRS, SEP 4/2332, clipping, *Daily Record*, 10 October 1967.

⁷⁹ NRS, SEP 4/2332, Michael McGahey to Willie Ross, 3 October 1967.

Chairman, told D. J. Turner of the Ministry of Power in Edinburgh that Michael was not doomed,⁸⁰ a private position ventilated publicly through the press.⁸¹ Local management and unions agreed to retain 700 men, to enable the NCB's planned rehabilitation of the pit, with 784 redeployed immediately in east Fife, mainly to Seafield.⁸² Another 500 – all those aged over 55 years – accepted redundancy and early retirement, along with 200 or so younger men, who left for other sectors. NCB Scottish Divisional officials estimated that production could resume at Michael within fifteen months, at a cost of £4 million. The pit would build up rapidly thereafter, producing over 4,500 tonnes per day and making an annual profit of £750,000 by 1970-71, with a workforce of up to 1,500. At this rate the £4 million would be repaid, including interest at 7 per cent per annum, by 1977-78.⁸³

This promising road to recovery was abruptly blocked in the first week of October when NCB officials in London insisted that redundancy notices be issued to 650 of the 700 retained men.⁸⁴ Marsh told Daly that he understood the NCB's decision and could not oppose it, with the underground fire still burning and prospects for re-opening unclear.⁸⁵ Ross intervened, informing Marsh that prospects for the redundant men would be 'extremely poor', and that criticism of the government as well as the NCB would now follow,

⁸⁰ TNA, POWE 52/202, D. J. Turner, Ministry of Power, Edinburgh, Note for the record, Michael Disaster, 11 September 1967, and Note for the record, Disaster at Michael Pit: Employment Repercussions, 12 September 1967.

⁸¹ 'Nine men killed in pit 1,800ft below the Firth of Forth', *The Guardian*, 11 September 1967, 1.

⁸² NRS, CB 260/14/1, NCB, SNA, Industrial Relations Department, Michael Colliery, 18 December 1967.

⁸³ NRS, CB 360/21/1, NCB, SNA, Michael Colliery: Brief Report on Future Prospects, 18 September 1967.

⁸⁴ TNA, POWE 52/202, Clipping, 'Dismissal for 650 Michael miners', *The Scotsman*, 3 October 1967.

⁸⁵ TNA, POWE 52/202, Richard Marsh to Lawrence Daly, 11 October 1967.

for the pit had not foundered on poor worker performance or bad production results.⁸⁶ Ross is regarded in the historical literature as a careful guardian of distinct Scottish interests within the UK.⁸⁷ The Michael closure exemplifies the physical and social distance that he and other Scottish unionists were often obliged to bridge between UK policy-makers on the one hand and material conditions and public expectations in Scotland on the other hand. Turner of the Ministry of Power in Edinburgh communicated this difficulty to colleagues in Whitehall, emphasizing the surprise and disappointment – across Scotland broadly and within the Scottish Office and Scottish branches of the Board of Trade and Ministry of Labour – that the Michael men had been issued with redundancy notices so swiftly, ‘harshly and hastily’, when the future of the pit was formally undecided.⁸⁸

Michael’s closure was settled several weeks later, however, and not in Scotland. Reporters were briefed at the beginning of November that the decision would be taken by NCB officials in London, and ‘on economic grounds alone’.⁸⁹ On 21 November an NCB press release intimated that Michael would not re-open for production after all. The cost of reconstruction was reckoned by the officials in London to be £5 million rather than £4 million, and this was presented as an unacceptable commercial risk given the falling market for Scottish coal which could be met from other pits which would now enjoy extended lives. Pumping operations were maintained, to prevent flooding at nearby Frances, leaving open the possibility of rehabilitation if the market for Scottish coal unexpectedly grew,⁹⁰ although

⁸⁶ NRS, SEP 4/2332, Ross to Marsh, 13 October 1967.

⁸⁷ Alvin Jackson, *The Two Unions: Ireland, Scotland, and the Survival of the United Kingdom, 1707-2007* (Oxford, 2012), 275-8.

⁸⁸ TNA, POWE 52/202, D. J. Turner to C. G. Thorney, Coal Division, 13 October 1967.

⁸⁹ NRS, CB 360/13/14/5, clipping, *Daily Record*, 2 November 1967.

⁹⁰ NRS, CB 260/14/1, NCB, Michael Colliery, Press Statement, 11.30 a.m., 21 November 1967.

this was ruled out by NCB Finance Department officials the following spring, when demolition of buildings and disposal of equipment commenced.⁹¹

This outcome had been carefully choreographed, with Ministers first establishing a narrative of economic optimism for east Fife. One industrial alternative had been raised by the NUM. McGahey synthesized his analysis of the safety lessons of the disaster with a call that some of the redundant could be redeployed to manufacture self-rescuing breathing equipment. The NUM position was that all miners should be issued with this equipment, which the NCB accepted in principle during the course of the Michael public inquiry.⁹² A potentially large contract for an ambitious producer with a suitable model was therefore emerging. In the last week of September Board of Trade officials in Scotland spoke to the Managing Director of Mine Safety Appliances, Ltd of Glasgow, the most prominent Scottish firm in the market. He was unenthusiastic about locating expanded production in Fife: a burst of activity to meet the NCB's initial demand would be followed by an unprofitably small volume of replacement and repair work, and the manufacturing process would require precise engineering and quality control, implying large start-up costs in staff training.⁹³ This may have been a negotiating position, however, for by mid-October there were reports of the firm's willingness to move to Fife, possibly in vacant Board of Trade factories in Leven and Kirkcaldy.⁹⁴

⁹¹ NRS, CB 260/14/1, J. R. Walker, Chief Accountant, NCB Scottish Division, to D. M. Clement, Director General, NCB Finance Department, 30 April 1968, and NCB, NSA, Meeting held at Michael Colliery, 7 May 1968.

⁹² Ministry of Power, *Fire at Michael Colliery*, 28-9.

⁹³ TNA, POWE 52/202, P. J. L. Homan, Board of Trade Glasgow, to J. I. Smith, Scottish Office, 27 September 1967.

⁹⁴ 'NUM scheme to find jobs for miners could save lives', *The Guardian*, 9 October 1967, 3.

McGahey pursued this proposal and the broader economic stability of east Fife in direct talks with Ross on 16 October. The NUMSA President argued that Michael had a future as a large-scale producer and employer, and so the government should contribute to the costs of re-opening it, as well as improving the incentives for manufacturing firms to locate in the Leven area. Ross was non-committal,⁹⁵ and the government did nothing to encourage the transfer of self-rescuer manufacturing to Fife. Ministers were nevertheless sensitive to criticism that regional policy in Fife – concentrating upon Glenrothes as a growth point – had brought limited benefits to the Leven and Methil area. The means of amending policy to stimulate employment closer to Michael were eventually outlined by Lord Hughes, Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, meeting local authorities along with NCB and union representatives in Buckhaven on 14 November. Chief among these was the provision of rent-free Board of Trade accommodation for five years for firms offering ‘suitable employment’.⁹⁶ Ross and the Scottish Office had pressed Marsh and the Ministry of Power early in November to compel the NCB to delay its otherwise ‘premature’ announcement of Michael’s closure until Hughes could outline these regional assistance changes.⁹⁷ Shore, along with Anthony Crosland, responsible as President of the Board of Trade for the proposed regional policy adjustments, had supported Ross, with Marsh securing the NCB’s agreement to postpone news of the final decision.⁹⁸ This was contested by Michael’s workers and their trade union and local authority representatives, on

⁹⁵ NRS, SEP 4/2336, Note of a meeting held in the Map Room, St. Andrew’s House, 16 October 1967, between the Secretary of State and a deputation of officials from the mineworkers’ unions.

⁹⁶ NRS, SEP 4/2333, Michael Colliery: meeting between Lord Hughes and representatives of Fife local authorities, NCB and Mineworkers’ unions, Buckhaven, 14 November 1967.

⁹⁷ TNA, POWE 52/202, D. J. Turner, Note For the Record, Michael Colliery, 1 November 1967.

⁹⁸ NRS, SEP 4/2333, Shore to Marsh, 8 November 1967, Crosland to Ross, 9 November 1967, and Marsh to Ross, 13 November 1967.

economic as well as social grounds. Lobbying included direct appeals to both Wilson and Robens,⁹⁹ and joint industrial talks at Scottish Divisional level, where McGahey queried the rehabilitation cost of £5 million, which even as an over-estimate would be a ‘worthwhile investment’ given the pit’s profitability and extensive reserves of 40 to 50 million tonnes, in thick and easily workable seams. The damaging community effects of the closure were re-emphasized.¹⁰⁰ Parker, NCB Scottish Divisional Chairman, conveyed the feelings of his employees and the union representatives to Robens, who was unmoved, confirming Michael’s closure.¹⁰¹

This was a major transgression of the coalfield moral economy, with the decision taken by managerial fiat, in direct opposition to the stated interests and ambitions of the workforce. All subsequent pit closures in Scotland until the early 1980s were by negotiation, and scheduled to coincide with, or enable, the build-up of employment at other pits. Mining MPs and union representatives pursued moral economy arguments in the following weeks, linking the closure to the *Fuel Policy* strategy which had shaped the NCB’s conclusion that falling demand could be met without Michael. McGahey urged Ross to see that further closures would follow, each more likely in the wake of *Fuel Policy*, and in areas of Scotland where alternative employment was in short supply, including Fauldhouse in west Lothian

⁹⁹ TNA, POWE 52/202, John Fotheringham, Joint TU Committee, Michael Colliery, to the Prime Minister, 7 December, 1967, and NRS, CB 260/14/1, Fotheringham to Lord Robens, 23 November 1967.

¹⁰⁰ NRS, CB 360/13/14/5, Minute of Meeting on Michael Colliery held in Lauriston House, 6 December 1967.

¹⁰¹ NRS, CB 260/14/1, R. W. Parker, Divisional Chairman, to Robens, 6 December 1967, and Parker to D. J. Skidmore, Director, NCB, SNA, 7 December 1967.

and Knockshinnoch in east Ayrshire.¹⁰² Tom Swain, MP for Derbyshire North-East, and chair of the mining group of MPs, told Ross in January 1968 that Michael's closure was an unwelcome 'commercial decision arising from the Government's policies'. The same meeting was attended by Alex Eadie, MP for Midlothian and one-time NUM delegate at Michael's neighbour, Lochhead. From a moral economy perspective Eadie argued that Michael had 'worked a rich coalfield, there was a good labour force and good industrial relations'. The social costs of abandoning this economic resource were immense: 'This was not a depressed or depressing area', he said, 'and a great deal had been invested in social capital', including the development of high-achieving local authority schools.¹⁰³ Ross told the mining MPs that decisions about pit closures were taken by the NCB, and so he could do nothing to reverse the outcome. Ross reiterated this to union officials, led by McGahey, in Edinburgh in January 1968, saying that his role was confined to mitigating the effects of closures, chiefly through regional policy changes.¹⁰⁴

Union and local authority lobbying, the latter stressing the urgent necessity of alternative industrial employment,¹⁰⁵ had some impact. Michael was not rehabilitated. But the second important tenet of the moral economy, that the economic security of the workforce should be guaranteed, was just about sustained. Scottish Office Regional Development officers reviewed the employment legacy of the disaster in October 1970. NCB intelligence indicated that half the workforce had been redeployed at other pits: 844 in east

¹⁰² NRS, SEP 4/2336, McGahey to Ross, 21 December 1967.

¹⁰³ NRS, SEP 4/2334, Note of a meeting held in Dover House on Thursday 4th January 1968.

¹⁰⁴ NRS, SEP 4/2336, Note for the record: Secretary of State's meeting with the Scottish Area NUM on Friday 19 January 1968.

¹⁰⁵ NRS, SEP 4/2334, D. S. Davidson, Town Clerk, Burgh of Buckhaven and Methil, to J. Cormack, Private Secretary, Scottish Office, 12 January 1968.

Fife, 109 in west Fife, six in the Lothians and Ayrshire, and sixty in England. 206 men aged sixty and over and 303 men in the fifty-five to fifty-nine age group had received early retirement and access to their pensions immediately after the disaster. The remainder, roughly 650 men, had left the industry altogether, it was presumed to take jobs in other sectors.¹⁰⁶ This latter point bears emphasis. Employment prospects in east Fife were relatively bleak, as Ross pointed out to his government colleagues. Yet the situation was not hopeless and the regional policy adjustments made by the government in response to the crisis had a positive effect as time went on. Unemployment in the short-term peaked in the Leven and Methil employment exchange area in February 1968, at 6 per cent overall, and 7.2 per cent among males. It reached this level again in September 1970, although the impact of the policy changes was still being felt, with the Distillers Company Limited (DCL) announcing plans that month for a new blending and bottling plant in Leven. This would employ 900 by 1973, including 350-plus men,¹⁰⁷ and proved to be an important long-term initiative, with Diageo, the corporate successor to DCL, still a significant employer in east Fife in the second decade of the twenty-first century, following renewed expansion in 2011-12.¹⁰⁸ The blending and bottling plant embodied on a local scale the broadly successful trend in regional policy, with Scottish Gross Domestic Product per capita increasing from 87.7 per cent of the UK level in 1962 to 91.1 per cent in 1966-73 and then 96.0 in 1973-9.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ NRS, CB 260/14/1, James Hamill, Scottish Development Department, to J. E. Pardoe, NCB, SNA, Deputy Director, 28 July 1970, and Pardoe reply, 5 August 1970.

¹⁰⁷ NRS, SEP 4/2334, Miss M. J. Alexander, Regional Development Division, 'The Closure of Michael Colliery and Industrial Development in the Leven Area of Fife', 19 October 1970.

¹⁰⁸ *The Courier*, 19 December 2011, <http://www.thecourier.co.uk/News/Fife/article/19801/diageo-considers-further-fife-expansion.html>, accessed 22 October 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Scott, 'Regional development', 338.

Michael's closure was still an important economic loss in east Fife, depriving the area of 1,500 or more relatively well-paid manual jobs that would have been safe for perhaps another twenty years. Michael's scale and potential future in 1967 are worth reiterating. It was the NCB's largest Scottish unit and Ministry of Power officials predicted that it would out-live all others in Scotland, with the exception of those clustered around Longannet power station. Union representatives, moreover, were arguing that the colliery had 40 to 50 million tonnes of reserves. Taking the lower estimate of 40 million, to be extracted at the NCB's projected daily rate of 4,500 tonnes, would imply a life of thirty-five years or more from 1967. Coal was given a boost by the oil price surge from November 1973, and the election in 1974 of the Labour government which agreed with the NCB and industry unions the *Plan For Coal*, a strategy for investment and growth, reversing the contracting logic of *Fuel Policy*.¹¹⁰ This would have taken Michael into the 1980s, when the political economy of coal was transformed. The Thatcher governments imposed tight budgetary constraints on the industry, seeking to eliminate all units that were not making a narrowly-defined financial profit.¹¹¹ The NCB was also encouraged to abandon joint industrial procedures and agreements, so that meaningful union voice on the key strategic question of closures was removed.¹¹² The outcome of the miners' defeated strike against pit closures of 1984-5 was an acceleration of deindustrialization.¹¹³ In this new situation Michael would probably have

¹¹⁰ Andrew Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics. Volume 2: 1969-1995* (Aldershot, 2005), 113-17.

¹¹¹ Andrew Glyn, 'The Economic Case Against Pit Closures', in D. Cooper and T. Hopper (eds), *Debating Coal Closures: economic calculation in the coal dispute, 1984-5* (Cambridge, 1988), 57-94.

¹¹² Ian MacGregor with Rodney Taylor, *The Enemies Within: the Story of the Miners' Strike, 1984-5* (London, 1986), 13, 137, 236-7.

¹¹³ Jim Phillips, *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland, 1984-85* (Manchester, 2012), 38-46, 165-73.

closed within a year or two of 1985: Seafield, its nearest comparator in size and locality, did so in 1987.

Conclusion

Michael's physical remains consist of a memorial in East Wemyss, a miniature replica of the head-frame of No. 3 pit, where the fatalities took place.¹¹⁴ The colliery was not closed by the fire but by conscious decisions: by government ministers and officials, when constructing economic, fuel, regional and nationalized industry policies; and by NCB officials operating within the framework of these policies. Michael had substantial reserves of coal. With investment of up to £5 million these could have been profitably mined, for at least two more decades, providing energy, significant employment, and social stability in the towns and villages of east Fife. Policy-makers instead favoured different paths: assembly manufacturing, subsidized through regional policy, because it promised greater additional economic value; and diversification of electricity generation, with enlarged provision in the energy mix of oil, gas and nuclear power. This posing of alternatives, and the conscious taking of decisions about investment and disinvestment, is the core conclusion to draw from the closure of Michael. The episode shows that deindustrialization should be conceptualized as a deliberate and willed human phenomenon, with decisions made by economic and political actors in the course of social relationships and tensions.

¹¹⁴ Hutton, *Fife*, 93.

So Michael was made to disappear, and in the 1960s, rather than in the 1980s. This too should be emphasized. Deindustrialization generally and coal closures particularly preceded Thatcherism. Yet distinct circumstances applied in this earlier period of restructuring. Moral economy arguments emerged in response to the initial wave of closures and job losses in the late 1950s, and were expressed with increasing assertiveness by a new generation of union officials. These arguments constrained the extent and impact of coalfield deindustrialization in the 1960s and 1970s. Michael's closure was, in this sense, highly unusual, demonstrating that the workers' moral economy was contested, by NCB managers and UK policy-makers. The government's competing moral economy view, that workers should in some circumstances be required to move from coal and other 'traditional' sectors to higher growth manufacturing, in this instance superseded the workers' moral economy claim that coal closures should only be effected with their agreement. But even in this atypical case the workers' moral economy arguments were not entirely disregarded. The economic security of Michael's extended local community in east Fife was defended, chiefly by trade union and also local authority representatives. Their pressure secured changes in regional policy that stimulated at least one significant new source of employment in the area, the DCL blending and bottling plant in Leven. Moral economy ideas, along with workforce and union activism, also guided the NCB's strenuous efforts to provide jobs at other pits, mainly close by, for younger Michael workers. This is another important conclusion arising from the emphasis on policy choice and human agency: deindustrialization can be managed in different ways. In the 1980s coal closures were obtained unilaterally by the NCB, in pursuit of UK government policy aims, and in the context of rising unemployment and a radical decline in coalfield economic security. This

acceleration of deindustrialization was a more systematic and complete transgression of the coalfield workers' moral economy than the closure of Michael two decades earlier.