

The Socialist Labour Party and the Leadership of Early British Communism

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The Socialist Labour Party (SLP) contributed a small number of members to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) founded a century ago, compared with the considerably larger British Socialist Party (BSP). Nonetheless, some historians have claimed that leading SLP members, well-versed in Marxist theory, proved to be excellent leadership material and figured disproportionately in directing the early CPGB. 'Bolshevisation' of the party in the mid-1920s saw them crowded out by opportunist ex-BSP activists more amenable to Moscow, with a deleterious impact on the CPGB's theoretical clarity and political fortunes. Absorption in mundane activity blunted the former SLPers' theoretical edge and 'will to revolution'. A statistical analysis of compositional trends on the CPGB Executive Committee, 1920–1928, combined with examination of the 19 ex-SLPers who sat on it and more detailed exploration of major ex-SLP protagonists, confirms they punched above their weight, not just initially but through the 1920s. However, the turning point was not 'Bolshevisation' but the onset in 1929 of Stalin's leftist Third Period. There is scant evidence that former SLP representatives were replaced in the leadership by former BSP activists. The idea of conflicting SLP and BSP political identities persisting beyond the party's 'bedding down' period is exaggerated and fails to facilitate understanding of CPGB development during its first decade.

Keywords: *Communist Party of Great Britain; Socialist Labour Party; British Socialist Party; Comintern; National Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee Movement; Tom Bell; Arthur MacManus; Jack Murphy; William Paul.*

British Communism in the 1920s: Historiographical Verdicts

The foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1920 constituted a landmark in British socialism. It brought to an end the pioneering phase inaugurated when H.M. Hyndman established the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1883–1884 and prefaced a new chapter in the history of Marxism in Britain. The intensified hopes for a socialist future and the enhanced possibilities for attaining it that Communism's nativity engendered and the opportunities and openings the CPGB's subsequent degeneration and

subordination to Stalinism obstructed, shaped the twentieth-century British left.¹ Members of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), a small organisation which seceded from the SDF in 1903 played a significant part in the making of British Communism, although the SLP itself contributed only a fraction of the members of the CPGB which celebrates its centenary in 2020.² The most convincing estimates of attendance at the Founding Convention in London a hundred summers ago, indicate the assembled delegates represented 5,275 members. Only 799 came from the SLP/Communist Unity Group (CUG) which consisted largely although not completely of members of the SLP, compared with 3,336 from the British Socialist Party (BSP), lineal successor of the SDF, and 1,260 from miscellaneous bodies.³ Nonetheless, socialist historians have suggested that if we consider the leadership of the CPGB in its early years, members of the SLP punched above their weight compared with the much larger BSP foundation contingent. Further, their eclipse by the end of the 1920s reflected the triumph of political orthodoxy and the CPGB's subordination to the Comintern. Walter Kendall, who notes the appeal the SLP's internationalism, devotion to theory, disciplined organisation and

¹ The literature on British Communism which has proliferated since 1990 has not greatly added to our knowledge and understanding of the events surrounding the foundation of the CPGB. L.J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development until 1929* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966), pp.1–72, and Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900–1921: The Origins of British Communism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), continue to command the field. Raymond Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (London: Croom Helm, 1977) is also instructive, together with other work cited in this article. The official version is James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, vol. 1: Formation and Early Years, 1919–1924* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), pp.1–74. See also Martin Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation* (Keele: Ryburn Publishing, 1994), particularly pp.216–306.

² The CPGB dated its foundation to the London Convention of July–August 1920. This is formally correct as the Communist Party-British Section of the Third International (CP-BSTI) and the Scottish-based Communist Labour Party (CLP) which joined at the January 1921 Congress as well as the Independent Labour Party (ILP) left, which entered in Spring 1921, technically joined the pre-existing CPGB. From a broader perspective, the foundation process was only complete by 1921.

³ Kendall, *op.cit.*, pp.303–305, is followed by Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920–1943* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.30. Although he considered them more reliable than figures of party membership – the BSP affiliated an exaggerated 10,000 members to the Labour Party and the SLP claimed 1,258 members – Kendall believed the Convention figures were still inflated. What is clear, however, is that BSP entrants to the CPGB greatly exceeded the numbers enrolling from the SLP. The Communist Unity Group (CUG) arose from an initiative by the SLP activists negotiating with the BSP concerned at their party leaders' opposition to a future Communist Party affiliating to the Labour Party. They canvassed SLP branches to send delegates to a conference in April 1920 where the CUG was constituted. It proceeded to appoint delegates to the CPGB's Founding Convention.

industrial orientation held for the Russians, claimed that in terms of transcending what they saw as the problems of the earlier Marxist movement and creating a cadre in Moscow's image, 'the ex-SLPers who were rapidly elevated to the leadership proved excellent material'.⁴ Ray Challinor concurred but observed that their tenure at the top was limited with debilitating consequences: 'For a time they held highly influential positions within the CPGB but gradually they were squeezed out and replaced by apostles of Moscow orthodoxy like Dutt and Pollitt.'⁵ In his view, the ex-SLP Marxists degenerated with the new movement: 'far from shifting the Communist Party to a revolutionary position, in most instances, they succeeded only in losing their own'.⁶

In their study of the CPGB in industry, James Hinton and Richard Hyman argued:

The Party's lack of theoretical clarity may have been due in part to the change in perspective which followed the process of 'Bolshevisation'. The most prominent figures in the party's early years – men like Murphy, Bell and MacManus – had their roots in an organisation which consistently emphasised revolutionary theory. The SLP's main weakness – its rigidity and sectarianism – had been largely overcome in the course of the wartime shopfloor struggles ... Those who most directly controlled CP industrial policy after 1923 – men like Pollitt, Dutt, Gallacher and Campbell – had, for the most part, lacked so rigorous a theoretical background and many had their roots in the opportunist politics of the BSP ... even before 1923 the theoretical acuity of the ex-SLPers was blunted by their immersion in the day-to-day running of Party affairs...⁷

For Stuart Macintyre, the sectarian turn in CPGB politics, which he sees as developing after 1926, contributed to the decline in influence of self-educated standard-bearers of working-class culture who brought theory to bear on practice: 'The first generation of Communist leaders – men like Tom Bell, Johnny Campbell, Arthur MacManus, J.T. Murphy and William

⁴ Kendall, op.cit., p.300.

⁵ Challinor, op.cit., p.278.

⁶ Ibid., p.275: 'They were elbowed out as the party bureaucracy became firmly established'. Other commentators rather confusingly claim that the CPGB was debilitated by the fact that the SLP itself – as distinct from its members in the CUG – did not join the new party in 1920. The early CPGB lacked the vitality present in its U.S. counterpart because it 'failed to win over the syndicalists and Celts of the Socialist Labour Party and was left with only former members of H.M. Hyndman's sterile British Socialist Party' – Introduction to *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920–1928* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992), p. 10.

⁷ James Hinton and Richard Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), pp. 69–70.

Paul, who all combined practical experience with a thorough grounding in this culture – were relegated to positions of secondary importance by the end of the decade.’⁸ With the exception of Campbell, who sits uneasily in this company, all the above were members of the SLP.

The purpose of this essay is to re-assess these earlier judgments by examining the individuals and evidence more closely, and in the light of newly available materials, than texts concerned with larger narratives were able to do. Utilising a prosopographical approach, we analysed the origins, affiliations, experience and destinations of former members of the SLP who served in the CPGB leadership in the 1920s. We studied the longevity of their tenure in the elite and compared the ex-SLP contingent with the group which originated in the numerically larger BSP.⁹ With few exceptions, Communist leaders sat on the Executive Committee (EC), the party’s governing body between Congresses. We have therefore taken its membership as reasonably representative of the CPGB leadership.¹⁰ Scrutiny of almost the complete cohort enabled us to test earlier conclusions against more detailed data and establish the history, role and influence of former SLP activists on British Communism with greater exactitude.

The next section acquaints readers with essential background, sketching the development of the SLP from its inception in 1903 until leading activists and their supporters regrouped in the CUG entered the CPGB in 1920. The third section employs statistical analysis of the 15 former SLP members who served on the CPGB executive during ‘the long

⁸ Stuart Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 97–98. Campbell, a member of the BSP more than a decade younger than Bell or Paul and five years younger than MacManus or Murphy, had little history as an activist in the Glasgow working class before August 1918 when he was demobbed after volunteering for military service in 1914. He was a shop assistant drafted into the postwar Scottish Workers’ Committee as a protégé of William Gallacher and known in proletarian circles as ‘the boy’. He showed himself an activist of ability in the CPGB from the mid-1920s – questionably so in the earlier period.

⁹ See John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, ‘Towards a Prosopography of the American Communist Elite: The Foundation Years, 1919–1923’, *American Communist History*, 18: 3-4 (2019), pp.175–180.

¹⁰ See on this, *ibid.*, pp.179–180; Harvey Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Elite* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), pp.10–11. The body went under various names in the 1920s – Central Executive Committee and Central Committee. For uniformity and simplicity, we use ‘Executive Committee’ (EC). Sources for its membership are listed in note 34 below.

foundation period' between 1920 and 1923 and the additional 4 who made their debut in the period of 'Bolshevisation' and consolidation between 1923 and 1928. In comparing ex-SLP members with ex-BSP members who served on the EC, we look at origins, activity, tenure, party positions and future destinations. From statistics we turn to biography. The penultimate part of the paper recuperates ex-SLP members who served on the CPGB EC and measures them against previous assessments before presenting life histories of MacManus, Bell, Murphy and Paul – dubbed the 'Big Four' by Leslie Macfarlane in recognition of their prominence in the SLP and their key role in the making of British Communism.¹¹ While maintaining the focus on a specific problem, we have taken the opportunity of the CPGB's centenary to expand upon existing accounts of some of its creators. Our conclusion revisits the historiography in an attempt to answer some of the questions it poses. Did the ex-SLPers elected to the CPGB leadership provide 'excellent material' for assembling a new cadre? Were they 'squeezed out' by Communists from a BSP background more responsive to Moscow? Were the ex-BSPers deficient in the former SLPers' ability to combine theory and practice in a fashion necessary to Communist leadership? Did they exhibit opportunistic tendencies rooted in their earlier formation? Did immersion in running the party blunt the ex-SLPers theoretical acumen and revolutionary edge? What part did they play in the early years of British Communism?

'We are the British Bolsheviks': The SLP from De Leon to Lenin

The SLP was born out of dissatisfaction with the SDF. Its founders considered the politics of Hyndman's circle and those prepared to co-exist with them as unprincipled and opportunist. Key factors in its formation with some 80 members in 1903 were festering grievances over Hyndman's support for Karl Kautsky's 'India rubber' compromise at the 1900 Congress of

¹¹ Macfarlane, op.cit., p.30.

the Second International which in the aftermath of the Millerand affair permitted socialist participation in bourgeois governments in exceptional circumstances; and the SDF's involvement in the Labour Representation Committee, perceived as making significant concessions to reformism. Bolstered by antagonism to Hyndman's autocratic regime, his control of the party press and stance on imperialism and the Boer War, and influenced by the great Irish socialist, James Connolly, the dissidents discovered an alternative pole of attraction in the American SLP. They identified with its leader, Daniel De Leon's disdain for the institutions of the existing labour movement, trade unionism 'pure and simple' and its leaders, the 'labour lieutenants of capital'. They were drawn to his advocacy of a 'socialist industrial trade unionism' intimately linked to a political organisation. Contemptuous of mainstream social democratic parties, 'the impossibilists' did not entirely reject immediate demands or exploiting Parliament as a platform; they remained wary of legitimating an engine of corruption, suspicious of 'palliatives' and enthusiasts of 'direct action' on the industrial battlefield.¹² Aspiring to permeate practice with the immanence of revolution, the SLP developed as a dogmatic, cadre party. With high dues based on a membership of skilled workers, it only gradually transcended its Scottish base. It demonstrated tight discipline and intransigence towards competing currents combined with dedication to Marxist education and publication of Marxist texts. Members were prohibited from holding office in mainstream unions and the orientation to De Leonism was confirmed with the formation of the Advocates of Industrial Unionism in 1907 – in the aftermath of the establishment of the American Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) – and the launch in 1910 of the Industrial Workers of

¹² The main sources for the history of the SLP remain Thomas Bell, *Pioneering Days* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1941); Chushichi Tsuzuki. 'The Impossibilist Revolt in Britain', *International Review of Social History*, 1 (1956), pp. 277–339; Challinor, op.cit.; Kendall, op.cit. There are also two unpublished studies, D. M. Chewter, 'The History of the Socialist Labour Party of Great Britain from 1902 until 1921', M.Litt. Thesis, University of Oxford, 1965; and Helen R. Vernon, 'The Socialist Labour Party and the Working Class Movement on the Clyde, 1903–1921', M.Phil. Thesis, University of Leeds, 1967; *The Socialist*, 'Official Organ of the Socialist Labour Party' published between 1902 and 1924, is an invaluable research tool.

Great Britain (IWGB). The party saw its ideas validated in the Ruskin College strike of 1909 which stimulated the spread of the movement for Independent Working Class Education (IWCE); but it did not greatly benefit in terms of recruitment from the acceleration in industrial militancy, union membership and interest in syndicalism which characterised ‘the Great Unrest’ of 1910–1914.¹³

The impact of De Leon’s ideas was real. However, parallels with the subordination of the CPGB to the Comintern and suggestions the earlier experience prepared future Communists for what was to come appear overdrawn.¹⁴ The Americans exercised influence through De Leon’s writings and the *Weekly People*, not through a bureaucratic centralist world party or via directives and administrative measures. There was a common ideological base but no mandatory ‘line’. The SLP experienced doctrinal disputation – for example, in 1906 over De Leon’s alleged dilution of ‘socialist industrial unionism’ to facilitate his participation in the IWW, while 1911 witnessed schism in the IWGB.¹⁵ The pressures and possibilities of orthodox trade unionism, considerably stronger in Britain than in the USA and thus the bleaker prospects of ‘dual unionism’, symptomatically impelled relaxation of the rules on holding office, while after 1911 the IWGB was reduced to a propaganda role. By 1912, new dissenters were accusing the SLP of departing from the De Leonite gospel by adapting to orthodox trade unionism; ‘fully three-fourths of the party’, they claimed, ‘consisted of members who were connected with shop stewardism’.¹⁶

Attempts to assimilate Bolshevism and De Leonism suffer from a tendency to inflate similarities – notably their common emphasis on theory and a centralised, disciplined party –

¹³ Challinor, op.cit., pp.9–122; Kendall, op.cit., pp.63–76.

¹⁴ For an example of such thinking, see Kendall, op.cit., p.76. For the American party, see Frank Girard and Ben Parry, *The Socialist Labor Party, 1876–1991: A Short History* (Philadelphia, PA: Livra Books, 1991).

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 69–70; Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism, 1910–1914* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), pp.44–45; Ralph Darlington, *Radical Unionism: The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp.133–134.

¹⁶ Challinor, op.cit., p.119.

and exaggerate suggestions that Lenin was ideologically indebted to the American pioneer. In distinction to Lenin, De Leon was a maximalist who rejected programmatic integration of minimal demands. There were salient differences between the primary role he accorded to ‘socialist industrial unionism’, driven by revolutionary unions which would generalise strikes, inspire socialist awareness and accomplish a potentially peaceful take-over of capitalist industries, at the head of a largely spontaneous movement from below – its efforts supplemented on the ideological plane by a propagandist party enlightening the proletariat. And Lenin’s insistence on a revolution-making party whose cadres were organised to intervene collectively and programmatically, where at all possible, in existing institutions and day-to-day struggles, a party which in a potentially revolutionary conjuncture would stimulate and work within soviets, not only to transform understanding but to consciously organise and direct the insurgent workers towards the preparation and execution of armed insurrection and the conquest of state power. De Leon envisaged the socialist industrial commonwealth as a direct product of revolution, had nothing to say about transitional stages to socialism or the dictatorship of the proletariat, and did not rule out ‘socialism in one country’.¹⁷

Converging wartime developments re-shaped the SLP and propelled its activists towards eventual engagement in the gestation of the CPGB. The first was the participation of members in the shop stewards’ movement which emerged to occupy the space vacated by the trade union bureaucracy’s co-option into the war effort, local workers’ committees, most notably on Clydeside, and the National Shop Stewards and Workers’ Committee Movement (NSS&WCM). Involvement in mass struggle reinforced SLP union activists’ nascent awareness of the inappropriateness of aspects of De Leon’s teaching to Britain; and the

¹⁷ For a discussion, see Stephen Coleman, *Daniel De Leon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp.154–168.

potential for mobilising the rank and file of reformist unions to outflank the ‘labour lieutenants of capital’.¹⁸ Before 1917, there were clear limits to their development, not least continued attachment to industrial unionism, a half-hearted attitude to fighting inside existing unions, and syndicalist suspicion of leadership – as well as failure to relate militancy to the war itself rather than fighting its effects. The SLP opposed the conflict and publicised initiatives to end it. It failed to mandate, still less organise, its activists to agitate against it in industry.¹⁹ The second development was the 1917 revolution. With a membership of perhaps 600, the SLP embraced the Bolshevik cause, endorsed its methods, and advocated a united Communist Party which would spearhead the British revolution.²⁰ Progress was facilitated by the prestige of the shop stewards’ leaders who saw in the workers’ committees embryonic soviets.²¹ By the end of 1918, its press was proclaiming: ‘The SLP is the only political organisation that stands wholeheartedly and uncompromisingly for the Soviet idea ... We are the British Bolsheviks.’²²

That might have been challenged by the BSP. In 1916, its anti-war majority dislodged the Hyndman clique. Through 1918, the organisation moved towards the Russian road. Under the influence of a longstanding activist, the Russian émigré, Theodore Rothstein, it would soon part company with those who clung to the prospect of revolution through parliamentary change, and vote for a Communist Party affiliated to the Third International (Comintern).²³ The BSP’s determination to maintain its affiliation to the Labour Party still provoked charges of reformism and opportunism from the SLP. What was overlooked under the heady rhetoric of Bolshevism was that, at least for some, the devil in the detail of fusion would prove

¹⁸ James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards’ Movement* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973).

¹⁹ Challinor, *op.cit.*, pp.25–126, 143–144, 155–158, 184–185. He notes that there were some defencist tendencies in the party – see also Bell, *op.cit.*, pp.102–103; Kendall, *op.cit.*, pp.121–129.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.176–180.

²¹ Hinton, *op.cit.*, pp.301–303.

²² *Socialist*, December 1918.

²³ Hinton, *op.cit.*, pp.298–301.

insuperable, while for the majority of British Marxists ‘the idea of a disciplined, centralised party, working in a planned, organised way in the trade unions and Labour Party, was completely new and outside their experience’.²⁴ What was glossed over in the climate of ecumenism was that deep-seated convictions rarely dissipate overnight. Embedded tensions were signalled by the claim, as negotiations commenced in December 1918, that the SLP’s purpose was ‘to pull the best elements of the BSP and ILP out of these organisations’.²⁵

Nevertheless, the insurgent mood of sections of workers through 1919 imparted purpose to the negotiations. In a time of hope, when many socialists believed Britain stood on the brink of revolution, and a united party was imperative, the SLP itself was changing. Membership increased to around 1,300 by the end of the year and the now weekly *Socialist* was selling 10,000 copies per issue.²⁶ The NSS&WCM leaders, Bell, MacManus, Paul, Dave Ramsay and Tom Clark – the first three stood as SLP candidates in the 1918 general election – took their experiences into the party. At a Special Conference in January 1919, they carried suspension of the SLP’s constitution and adoption of a statement endorsing the dictatorship of the proletariat, soviets and utilising parliament as a platform for revolutionary propaganda. This was circulated to the BSP and ILP and Bell, MacManus, Paul and Murphy appointed as a Unity Committee to negotiate on behalf of the party, although any agreement would require membership approval.²⁷

Developments came thick and fast in a tortuous, 18-month process. Through 1919, Comintern influence intensified. Moscow’s determination to purify any new party combined with the ILP leadership’s ingrained reformism to eliminate it from discussions. It was replaced by the leftist Workers’ Socialist Federation (WSF) animated by Sylvia Pankhurst

²⁴ Michael Woodhouse, ‘Marxism and Stalinism in Britain, 1920–1926’, in Michael Woodhouse and Brian Pearce, *Essays on the History of Communism in Britain* (London: New Park Publications, 1975), p.51.

²⁵ *Socialist*, December 1918.

²⁶ Macfarlane, *op.cit.*, pp.29–30.

²⁷ Kendall, *op.cit.*, p.199; Macfarlane, *op.cit.*, p.30; Ralph Darlington, *The Political Trajectory of J.T. Murphy* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), pp.55–57.

and the syndicalist South Wales Socialist Society (SWSS).²⁸ ‘The Big Four’ entered the Comintern orbit. They were keener on unity than the SLP leadership and more flexible about its terms as the BSP dug in over Labour Party affiliation. Divisions surfaced from June 1919 when MacManus and Bell agreed with the BSP to recommend that a decision on the new party affiliating to Labour be postponed until after the marriage was consummated. A group of SLP leaders around Thomas Mitchell and James Clunie pushed back. It was apparent that Moscow considered the BSP essential to any Communist Party and its larger membership would be able to outvote former SLP and, if relevant, WSF members once fusion occurred. For some SLP activists, merger without guarantees meant sacrificing their party’s principles and identity and entailed a sacrifice too far. On a 4–3 vote, the executive wound up the Unity Committee and organised a referendum in which members were required to answer two questions: first, did they favour fusion, and second, did they support a ballot of members of the fused organisation on affiliating to Labour.²⁹

Announced in January 1920, the result disclosed that a majority backed the first proposition but opposed the second. The SLP’s position hardened: its leaders insisted in substance that the BSP drop Labour Party affiliation for the foreseeable future. They received support from the WSF and the SWSS and were encouraged by the Amsterdam Bureau of the Comintern, whose leaders, swayed by the left-wing Dutch Communists, deduced from Moscow’s exhortations that revolutionaries should break both politically and organisationally with the parties of the Second International, that British Communists should have nothing to do with Labour.³⁰ The shop stewards’ leaders now replaced their party as collaborators with the BSP and prepared for a new organisation without the SLP, WSF or SWSS. Rather than taking the argument into the SLP, they reconstituted themselves as the CUG and in April

²⁸ Macfarlane, *op.cit.*, pp.47–48.

²⁹ Challinor, *op.cit.*, pp.242–243; Kendall, *op.cit.*, pp.205–206.

³⁰ Thorpe, *op.cit.*, pp.27–28; Pierre Broué, *L’Histoire De L’Internationale Communiste, 1919–1943* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), pp.95, 140–143.

1920 convened a meeting attended by representatives from the SLP and independents. Coinciding with the SLP's annual conference, the gathering pledged to pursue unity while opposing Labour Party affiliation.³¹ Events favoured them: in May, impatient with leftism, the Comintern dealt a blow to SLP hopes by dissolving the Amsterdam Bureau.³² At that point Lenin had not completed *Left-Wing Communism* which highlighted the importance of Labour Party affiliation and work in the labour movement generally – it would be published in English in July – but it was already very clear which way the wind from the East was blowing.

On the one hand, the SLP's historic identity as a party whose antipathy to reformism would not countenance compromise and its adherence to what it considered fundamental principle and others considered sectarianism, reasserted themselves over enthusiasm for the Comintern. It had not entirely lost its 'rigidity' and 'sectarianism'. On the other hand, the stewards' leaders, imbued with the iconoclastic spirit of 1917, prioritised unity on the Comintern's terms and were ready, if needs be, to live with intervention in a Labour Party they had long dismissed. It was, thus, the CUG, not the SLP, that participated with the BSP and the small Communist Group of the National Guilds League in the Founding Convention. The WSF, recast as the Communist Party-British Section Third International (CP-BSTI), stayed away. Aligned with members of the SWSS, it joined the CPGB at its Second Congress in January 1921, in company with the ephemeral, Scotland-based Communist Labour Party (CLP). Without the subsidies and international link that kept the CPGB alive in the unforgiving world of the early 1920s, the SLP fell apart. By 1924 the *Socialist* had ceased publication and thereafter the party dwindled into insignificance.³³

³¹ Kendall, op.cit., p.209; Macfarlane, op.cit., pp.52–53.

³² Broué, op.cit., pp.141–142.

³³ The most detailed account of the Foundation Convention is in Klugmann, op.cit., pp.36–53. For the Second January 1921 Congress, see ibid., pp.63–69. For the SLP's demise, see Challinor, op.cit., pp.274–275.

This sketch suggests a number of points pertinent to the historiographical discussion. If the SLP ‘consistently emphasised revolutionary theory’, that theory was, before 1917 and formally until 1919, broadly De Leonist, not Bolshevik theory. Suggestions that their training in De Leonism equipped SLP cadres to embrace Bolshevism and accept Moscow’s authority may be valid at the very general level of looking to outside inspiration but hardly in terms of political specifics. It is important, moreover, to stress that the SLP’s ideas and politics were not static but developed through its history. Activists’ ideas began to change under the impact of engagement in the labour movement and war; 1917 ensured they developed further. The organisation grew from fewer than a hundred members, concentrated in Scotland, to some 1,300 by 1920, a high proportion of whom had enrolled in 1919. As the internal divisions of 1919–1920 highlighted, its members became less homogeneous politically: they were the product of different experiences, agitated in different contexts, and joined the SLP at different times. The extent to which we can talk of a composite SLP identity which impressed itself on the contingent which founded the CPGB – still less a political genotype which endured and significantly influenced ex-SLPers in leadership roles in a new party with an innovative ideology – is problematic. The same applies to BSP members who became Communists. We will return to this issue, but we look next at the light that statistics shed on judgments in the literature concerning the role former SLP activists played in the CPGB.

Former SLP and BSP Members: A Statistical Comparison

Between 1920 and 1928, 74 activists served on the CPGB EC: 19 (26%) of them were former SLPers; 24 (32%) were former BSP members; and 31 (42%) had been in other organizations or joined the CPGB directly, while in a handful of cases their previous affiliation is

unknown.³⁴ **Appendix 1** lists leading Communists from the SLP, **Appendix 2** those from the BSP: we have compiled the details from Security Service and Comintern files, biographical dictionaries, genealogical websites and press reports.³⁵ **Table 1** enumerates all ex-members

[Insert Appendices 1 and 2 at the end of this article starting on a new page]

of the SLP and BSP who served on CPGB ECs between 1920 and 1928. In every case before 1926, sometime members of these parties taken together constituted a majority; in 1926 and 1927 there was parity with the ‘Other’ category. The mean percentage representation over these years of former BSPers was 33%, and of ex-SLP members, 30% There is only limited evidence of a relative decline in the number of SLPers from 1924 when ‘Bolshevisation’ was taking off. The total of former SLP members elected to the four ECs between May 1924 and October 1927 – 26 – was slightly less than the 30 ex-BSPers. However, the ‘Other’ category represented a growing percentage as the decade progressed and there was a corresponding decline in the representation of *both* ex-SLP and ex-BSPers.

[insert Table 1 near here]

The national origins of the two groups contrasted sharply. The BSP cohort was overwhelmingly English: 19 (79%) were English-born compared with only 4 (17%) Scots;

³⁴ Our list of EC members was compiled from the following sources: Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester, Communist Party Archive (CPA), CP/CENT/CONG/01/02, Communist Unity Convention, July 31–August 1, 1920, Official Report; *Communist*, 5 February 1921; Macfarlane, op.cit., pp.67, 74, 83–84, 87, 135–136; Klugmann, op.cit., pp.69, 212–213; CPA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/05, Annual Party Conference, October 1922, Report of National Executive Committee; Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), 495/38/1, Transcripts of the English Commission of the ECCL, June–July, 1923 (hereafter English Commission); CPA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/06, Sixth Congress of the CPGB, May 17–19, 1924, Report of Central Committee; *Workers’ Weekly*, 23 May 1924; James Klugmann, *History of the British Communist Party, vol. 2: The General Strike, 1925–1926* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), pp.359–363; Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927–1941* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), p.339.

³⁵ The previous affiliation, if any, is unknown for 7 individuals: James E. Cameron, W.C. Loeber, William McKie, J.W. Pratt, Mrs A. Thomas and George Wheeler. Graham Stevenson plausibly identified Beth Turner, CPGB Women’s Officer, 1924–1929, with the ‘Mrs Turner’ who represented Rotherham CUG at the Foundation Convention: <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2017/10/03/turner-beth/>. However, adherence to the CUG which included a variety of future Communists does not of itself establish that Turner was a member of the SLP. Our research on this point continues and arguably erring on the side of caution we have, for present purposes, discounted Turner as a member which depresses the weight of the SLP presence in the CPGB leadership. It should also be noted that Fred Shaw (see Appendix 2) was at one time an SLP member but joined the CPGB as a leading BSPer.

Elsbury was born in Russia but raised in Leeds. The SLP contingent was predominantly ‘Celtic’: 9 (53%) of those for whom this information is available were born in Scotland, 1 each in Wales and Ireland; MacManus and McLean had Irish parents; Murphy’s father was Irish. While we lack information for Cook and MacDonald, they were probably born in Wales and Scotland, respectively. The 6 English-born represented less than a third of the SLP group. Shared cultural backgrounds may have reinforced political divisions and personal rivalries: William McLaine, a former Manchester engineer and BSP Executive member who worked at CPGB headquarters in the early 1920s recalled: ‘all the Glasgow lot got control of everything’.³⁶ To such national distinctions can be added differing social origins: 19 (79%) of the BSP group were from working-class families, 5 (21%) came from the middle class. In contrast, the 16 families of former SLP members for whom we have information were overwhelmingly working-class, although Silvester’s father was a white-collar worker; we lack knowledge of Lavin, MacDonald and Cook’s backgrounds but given the latter’s business interests, he may have sprung from the middle class.

There was similar differentiation in occupations. A small majority of former BSPers – 14 (58%) – were manual workers: 11 can be classified as skilled, including 5 metal workers; 1 unskilled; and 2 were miners. There were 6 white-collar workers, two self-employed, Montefiore had independent means and Malone an MP’s salary. The SLP cohort was predominantly proletarian: 15 (83%) of the 18 for whom occupational data is available, were manual workers: 9 skilled, including 7 metalworkers; 2 unskilled; and 4 miners. One was a clerk, and 2 ran small businesses. In terms of age, there was little difference between the two groups: the mean age of the **ex-BSPers in 1920 was 35.8 years**. The mean age of the former SLPers was slightly lower, 34.8 years. Both contingents were therefore relatively youthful at the time of the CPGB’s formation: 14 (78%) of the SLP group were under 40, compared with

³⁶ CPA, CP/CENT/COMM/10/2, W. McLaine to Harry Pollitt, 1 September 1956.

17 (70%) of former BSPers. At the end of our period, however, only 6 (33%) from the SLP and 12 (50%) from the BSP would have been under 40.

Appendices 1 and 2 list the various pre-CPGB affiliations of the two groups. From a scattered distribution, two figures stand out. First, only 10 (53%) of the SLP cohort were identified with the CUG. SLPers such as Murphy and Brain joined the CPGB directly at its foundation, they were not associated with the transitional breakaway while McGeachan remained an SLP activist as late as October 1920.³⁷ Like MacDonald and McLean, McGeachan became a CLP supporter. This suggests the extent to which in 1919–1920 Marxist politics were in flux and allegiances were volatile. Second, there were marked differences between the two groups' participation in the wartime movements. Only 5 BSPers had links with local workers' committees or the NSS&WCM – and they were not in the national body's wartime leadership – and 2 with the analogous miners' reform committees. The comparable figures for the SLP contingent were 10 and 2, with MacManus, Murphy and Ramsay holding official positions in the NSS&WCM. This contrast between the involvement of 29% (BSP) and 63% (SLP) in the shop stewards and miners' reform movements reflects the SLP's deeper roots in the war-time and immediate post-war militancy. The prestige which accrued from leadership of a mass movement may have provided a launch pad to leading roles in the CPGB. The SLP opposed the war but the BSP was divided. While Campbell and Rothstein joined the military, 5 other ex-BSPers – Deer, Elsbury, Peet, Vaughan and Young – were conscientious objectors (COs). That only Cook and Paul among the SLPers were COs may reflect the higher proportion employed in munitions and mining, trades partly protected from conscription.

³⁷ *Socialist*, 7 October 1920,

Dates of joining and sometimes leaving the CPGB are provided in the **Appendices**. Almost all the ex-BSPers enrolled in 1920.³⁸ Of the SLP contingent, 14 (74%) entered the in 1920, most of the remainder in 1921. Those listed in the appendices can therefore be regarded as foundation members, with the exception of Allan who did not transfer from the SLP to the CPGB until 1923. The various offices former SLP and BSP members occupied are enumerated in **Table 2**. The data should be interpreted with caution because an individual's multiple roles are recorded separately. The numerous posts held by Bell, MacManus and Murphy from the SLP and by Campbell, Gallacher and Pollitt from the BSP may distort the overall picture. Nevertheless, the table suggests that ex-SLPers held organizing positions disproportionate to their numbers in the CPGB apparatus. While BSPers dominated national officers' posts, including Inkpin as long-serving secretary, their numerical superiority was partially offset by MacManus's occupancy of the powerful position of party chair between 1920 and 1922.

[insert Table 2 near here]

Such judgements should be weighed against the transient tenure of many representatives. **Table 3** indicates that no less than 58% of ex-SLPers and two-thirds of former BSP members served on only 1 or 2 of the 10 ECs between 1920 and 1928; 5 ex-SLP and 5 ex-BSP sat on between 3 and 5 committees. Only 3 from each group featured on 6 or more: Bell, MacManus and Murphy from the SLP, Gallacher, Inkpin and Pollitt from the BSP. This reflects the brief duration of CPGB membership of many of this foundation cohort, although this applies particularly to its BSP segment. Of the former BSP group, 11 (46%) had left the party by 1930, 5 of them moving to Labour. Of the SLPers, only 3 (16%) had left by

[insert Table 3 near here]

³⁸ Gallacher became a member of the CLP to argue for unity with the CPGB. There is uncertainty concerning Campbell, who was also associated with CLP's formation. Years later, he claimed he had joined the CPGB in October 1920: National Archives, UK, (hereafter NA), KV2/1189, John Ross Campbell, Information from party registration card, 6 March 1952.

the end of the decade, although several disappeared from the historical record. Age took its toll: Hewlett and MacManus (ex-SLP) and Watts (ex-BSP) had died by 1928. Looking beyond that year, 74% of former SLP members never served on the committee again. However, the figure for ex-BSPers was 71%, contradicting suggestions that SLPers were ‘squeezed out’ by them. Even those figures underestimate the dramatic changes the Third Period brought about. Of the 5 SLPers elected after 1928, Bell, Jackson, and Webb sat on only one committee in 1929 while Murphy, elected to 2, resigned from the CPGB in 1932; Allan served on 4, by virtue of his positions in the miners’ unions, constituting the last former SLP representative, although his membership of that party had been brief. Similar conclusions apply to the ex-BSPers: of the 7 who remained on the EC beyond 1928, Glading, Inkpin and Rothstein were elected solely to the January 1929 committee. The only true survivors were the remnants of the BSP contingent, Campbell, Gallacher and Pollitt, who figured on all 6 committees elected between 1929 and 1937.

These aggregate statistics add to our knowledge at the collective level. They confirm that ex-SLPers were disproportionately represented on the CPGB executive between January 1921 and March 1922. By the end of 1923, the number of ex-BSP members was more than double the ex-SLPers. Yet contrary to received opinion, this was a blip. From 1924 to 1927 former BSPers only just outnumbered their ex-SLP counterparts. The figures suggest that any impact of ‘Bolshevisation’ was slight and that before the convulsive Third Period, there was, in contrast with earlier assumptions, no significant falling away in the number of former SLPers relative to ex-BSPers, although there were some replacement of individuals: of the 19 ex-SLPers listed in **Appendix 1**, 9 did not serve after 1923; 6 served both before and after that year, and 4 were elected from 1924. Of themselves, the statistics tell us little about the individuals involved, whether they maintained or left behind earlier identities, exhibited qualities of leadership, and embodied distinctions between the political conformity and

theoretical sophistication, opportunism and principled politics, that some historians have attributed to the respective contingents. To consider these questions, we need to examine the protagonists.

SLP Life Histories

We look first at the majority of the SLP cohort listed in **Appendix 1** who played a minor, frequently ephemeral role in the CPGB leadership and have been largely overlooked by historians. Not to be confused with his illustrious namesake, ‘the fighting dominie’, John McLean of Bridgeton was a leading light in neither the SLP nor the CPGB. By March 1919 he had left the SLP to join Guy Aldred’s Glasgow Communist Group; from there he moved to the CLP, commandeered by Lenin’s convert, Willie Gallacher, to act as a conduit into the CPGB. Nothing more is heard of this Glasgow labourer after his resignation from the CPGB EC in 1921.³⁹ Joe MacDonald further illustrates the volatility of political allegiance immediately prior to the foundation of the CPGB. Active in the SLP into 1920, he decamped to the CLP but, after his short stay on the CPGB EC, vanished from the narrative.⁴⁰ Another Glaswegian, Alex McGeachan, participated in the 1911 Singers strike but defected from the SLP to the CLP. An example of the competing pressures of leftism and desire for unity and the *imprimatur* of the Comintern, he returned to obscurity after organising unemployed workers in Gourock in 1922.⁴¹ The *Socialist* claimed that the Welsh miner, Will Hewlett, had not been an SLP member for a year before he enrolled in the CPGB, owing to non-payment of dues. He died in a rail accident in Russia in 1921 while attending the inaugural conference

³⁹ *Communist* (Communist League), August 1919; *Worker*, 14 June 1919, 11 September, 16 October 1920; *Spur*, June, December 1920; *Socialist*, 7 October 1920, 3 February 1921; CPA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/04, Report of Executive Committee to March, 1922 Congress, p.1.

⁴⁰ *Worker*, 28 June 1919, 16 October 1920; *Socialist*, 25 March 1920.

⁴¹ *Worker*, 31 May 1919, 21 November 1921; *Socialist*, 12 August, 7 October 1920, 2 February 1922; *Communist*, 7 May 1921.

of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU).⁴² Active in the SLP in the decade before 1920 and a conscientious objector during the war, the Cardiff shop owner, Alf Cook, was employed at CPGB headquarters before falling victim to economies in 1922.⁴³ Pat Lavin, a sometime miner from an Irish background worked at the Scottish Labour College in 1920 and was active in the SLP, translating Lenin and Bukharin and Preobrazhensky for the party press. His career in the CPGB, where he represented the party in Moscow and worked for the Comintern in Berlin, was cut short in 1923 in a dispute over money.⁴⁴

On what we know of them, none of these individuals appears to have possessed the qualities necessary for Communist leadership imputed to SLP activists by Kendall, demonstrated the theoretical abilities ascribed to some of its members by Hinton and Hyman, or exercised significant influence within the infant party. The same goes for Bill Brain, CPGB Midlands Organiser in the early 1920s. An itinerant agitator after 1926, he was removed from the payroll in the 1929 purge which did not discriminate between former SLPers and ex-BSP adherents. It is stretching things to detect aspects of an SLP DNA in Brain's progress through the decade.⁴⁵ Tommy Jackson was a more substantial figure. Critical of Communist orthodoxy, he certainly exhibited theoretical acumen, although he ultimately fell into line and after his last indulgence in heresy defending Rosa Luxemburg against Stalin's maledictions, publicly recanted. What is pertinent to our discussion is that the SLP's impact on him seemed slight. When he joined in October 1917, he was already a mature Marxist and seems to have been a member for little more than 12 months in 1918–1919: he was periodically lapsed for non-payment of dues and expelled and reinstated for

⁴² *Daily Herald*, 1 August 1920; *Communist*, 5, 20 August 1920; Bell, op.cit., pp.228–229.

⁴³ *Pioneer*, 21, 28 September 1918; *Socialist*, 10 June 1920; Bell, op.cit., p.174; RGASPI, 495/100/61, Party Commission, First Report, p.25.

⁴⁴ John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'The British and French Representatives to the Communist International, 1920–1939: A Comparative Survey', *International Review of Social History*, 50 (2005), pp.208–209.

⁴⁵ NA, KV2/1184, William Thomas Edward Brain, passim.

speaking for the ILP. On this account, he was not an SLP member when he enrolled in the CPGB.⁴⁶

If ‘traditions are embodied in people’,⁴⁷ Owen Ford’s trajectory discloses few signs of an SLP tradition persisting in the CPGB if we are talking in political terms – qualities such as dedication, commitment, conviction and courage were not exclusive to the SLP which he joined in 1918. He was not a budding political leader and after a stint as Midlands Organiser returned to the Nottinghamshire mines, leaving the industry and party after victimisation.⁴⁸ The Birmingham activist, Fred Silvester experienced swift disillusionment with the CPGB and quit in 1922 for activism in the Labour Party, a destination hardly consistent with recent SLP theory, practice or tradition.⁴⁹ Harry Webb, who joined the SLP in Ashton, Lancashire, in 1906, operated for years in relative isolation. In the CPGB where he headed the secret ‘Supplementary Department’ and worked with Comintern agents, he played an important but ephemeral underground role. ‘Elbowing out’, if that describes his return to the ranks, may have been related to outspoken advocacy of revolutionary violence. His subsequent trajectory shows few signs of the stereotypical SLP virtues, although his leftism was rewarded with a brief return to the EC in December 1929.⁵⁰

The complexity of the position and the limited ability of fixed formulas to explain the impact of varying periods of membership of a party on the future ideas and practice of diverse activists subsequently operating in a party with different politics confronted by different conditions, is highlighted by the case of Aitken Ferguson. A boilermaker and union

⁴⁶ *Socialist*, 15 April 1920; Vivien Morton and John Saville, ‘Jackson, Thomas Alfred’, in Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. 4 (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp.99–108; John McLroy, ‘The establishment of intellectual orthodoxy and the Stalinization of British Communism, 1928–1933’, *Past and Present*, 192 (2006), pp.200–201.

⁴⁷ Kendall, *op.cit.*, p.300.

⁴⁸ A.R. Griffin, *The Miners of Nottinghamshire, 1914–1944: A History of the Nottingham Miners’ Unions* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962), pp. 38–39, 211, 223–225, 236; CPA, CP/CENT/CONG/01/04, Report of Executive to March, 1922 Congress, p.6.

⁴⁹ Lawrence Parker, *Communists and Labour: The National Left Wing Movement, 1925–1929* (London: Rotten Elements, 2019), pp.77–79.

⁵⁰ Thorpe, *op.cit.*, pp.31, 48, 53; CPA, CP/CENT/WOM/3/2, Lily Ferguson (Webb), ‘Some Party History’, p.2.

activist from the SLP's Clydeside redoubt, he was conscripted in 1916. By 1920, he was secretary of the Glasgow branch of the SLP and, on the authority of Harry McShane, who moved in similar circles, 'had got a good Marxist background in the SLP'.⁵¹ Ferguson did not figure in the CPGB leadership during 'the long foundation period' but, a little ironically in light of the schemas in the literature, was elevated to the EC in 1924, the year of 'Bolshevisation'. He was reported to be 'one of the most capable men in Scotland theoretically' but registered little apparent contribution in that sphere during succeeding years.⁵² The sole recorded initiative he undertook was an ultimately abortive project – contentious in Marxist and most certainly SLP theory, but consonant with the fallout of 'socialism in one country' – to marry Marxism and Scottish nationalism during the right-wing Popular Front period.⁵³ In his long career in the CPGB, he was to all intents and purposes an orthodox Communist who provided few indications that the theoretical background he had allegedly acquired in the SLP significantly informed his practice. The same might be said of Dave Ramsay, who was more evidently influenced by the shop stewards' movement than the SLP.⁵⁴ Tom Clark, in contrast, should be a paradigmatic case for traditional conceptions. He was an SLP founder member, again from the party's heartland. Remembered by Gallacher as 'Glasgow's greatest declaimer' of De Leonism, he played a significant part in the SLP's early years and became a shop steward at the Parkhead Forge, treasurer of the Clyde Workers' Committee (CWC), deported in 1916, and a leader of the NSS&WCM. His 17 years membership of the SLP raises expectations that the experience significantly marked him. Apart from an independent, at times idiosyncratic, attitude, evinced

⁵¹ Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *No Mean Fighter* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.142; <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2010/01/19/ferguson-aitken/>; NA, WO 363, Record of Service Paper, Aitken Ferguson, 22 August 1916. Ferguson would have had some, although far from complete, protection from the call-up as a skilled worker, although he was in his mid-twenties and unmarried.

⁵² McShane and Smith, *op.cit.*, p.226.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.224–227; Aitken Ferguson, *Scotland* (Glasgow: CPGB Scottish Area, n.d., c.1938).

⁵⁴ NA, KV2/1869, David Ramsey, [sic], Minnie Marie Ramsey, alias Ramsay.

concern for democracy, and commitment to trade unionism, there is little sign of this after 1920. He returned to the tools after a troubled period as the CPGB's Glasgow organiser and by mid-decade his brand of unorthodoxy produced only the conviction that the party's foundation had been premature. By 1928 he had resigned/been expelled and was subsequently a fixture on the AEU executive where his anti-Communism hardly personified SLP politics.⁵⁵

We have made reference to the careers of all known former members of the SLP who were CPGB foundation members and who served on the party's executive, in the interests of completeness. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that on the whole their trajectories reflect change rather more than continuity and fail to justify existing characterisations of the SLP contingent that entered the CPGB. However, most of the claims in the historiography are more narrowly focussed on the most prominent leaders of the cohort, viz: 'Upon the formation of the Communist Party, William Paul, with fellow SLPers Tom Bell, Arthur MacManus and J.T. Murphy, became the most influential leaders in the early years of its existence.'⁵⁶ It is necessary, therefore, to explore the life histories of 'the Big Four' in more detail in order to measure them against prevailing verdicts.

Arthur MacManus and Tom Bell: Studies in Subordination

Arthur MacManus (1888–1927)⁵⁷ was the youngest son of a family of Irish Catholic immigrants who lived in the East End of Glasgow off the Gallowgate. His father Patrick,

⁵⁵ NA, KV2/584, Thomas Clark; William Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1936), p.27.

⁵⁶ New Introduction to William Paul, *The State: Its Origin and Function* (Edinburgh: Proletarian Publishing, 1974 [1917]), no author, no pagination.

⁵⁷ J.T. Murphy. 'Arthur MacManus', *Communist International*, 30 March 1927, states MacManus was born '38 years ago in Belfast'. Later authorities have for the most part placed his birth in 1889 – for example, Kendall, *op.cit.* p.339, Hinton, *op.cit.*, p.124, Iain McLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1983), p.244. Macfarlane has his date of birth as 1892. None of the above follow Murphy in placing the birth in Belfast. The National Records of Scotland (NRS), Statutory Register of Births, 644/3, 1258, records an Arthur MacManus born in Glasgow on 5 July 1888. The Census of Scotland, 1911, 644/2, 9/15, lists this MacManus as an engineer in a sewing machine factory and includes a sister, Rosina, later a witness at MacManus's marriage

born in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, sympathised with the Fenians and served between 1867 and 1869 in the Papal Zouaves, an international brigade formed to defend the Holy See against the *Risorgimento*.⁵⁸ MacManus was educated at the parish school of St Mary's, Abercrombie Street, from which the Marist Brother Walfrid established Celtic Football Club in the year of his birth. He studied for the novitiate of the Marist order but abandoned his vocation, found employment as a metal worker in Glasgow factories and relinquished religion for the SLP.⁵⁹ Active in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) and IWGB – its main base was the Singer Sewing Machine Works at Kilbowie, Clydebank, where he worked – he played a leading role in the defeated 1911 strike.⁶⁰

By 1915, he had become a shop steward and representing Weir's, Cathcart, and later Beardmore's, Dalmuir, was prominent in the CWC. He was deported in Spring 1916 and moved to Edinburgh then to Liverpool from where, employed by Cunard, he established links with militant munitions workers in Barrow, Birmingham, Coventry, Derby, Leeds, London, Manchester, and Sheffield. He emerged as 'the leading agitator and organizer of the nascent shop stewards' movement' which was formally established in 1917.⁶¹ As chair of its National Administrative Council (NAC), he was remembered as 'the most eloquent of the shop stewards ...[his oratory] was like the firing of a Gatling gun'.⁶² Barely 5ft tall, 'almost a dwarf in stature' – ordered to stand up in one of many court appearances, he replied 'I am

(Brentford Register Office, Middlesex, 1 June 1920). The parents were from Northern Ireland but as a search of records there has turned up no alternative, we have taken the Glasgow records as reasonably conclusive.

⁵⁸ Bell, *op.cit.*, p. 94, stresses the family's nationalism, describing the father and uncles as 'belonging to the Fenian movement'. His claim that MacManus's father was a Papal Zouave who went to defend 'the Holy See during the Garibaldi movement' is corroborated by records which show Patrick MacManus, born 1845, served in the regiment between 1867 and 1869:

<https://diocese-quimper.fr/bibliotheque/files/original/d41bee874989d72a70b64b2e303c2741.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Bell, *op.cit.*, p.95, states MacManus was educated at 'the Catholic Seminary' in Abercrombie Street and 'got to be a Marist [*sic*] Brother in a convent in Dumfries', comments which demonstrate little understanding of contemporary Catholic education in Scotland. In all probability, he prepared for entry into the Order at St Michael Mount, an annexe of the then Marist-run St Joseph's College, Dumfries.

⁶⁰ Bell, *op.cit.*, pp.94, 72–75; McLean, *op.cit.*, pp.100–102; Challinor, *op.cit.*, pp.99–105.

⁶¹ Kendall, *op.cit.*, pp.154, 155–156.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.130; Hinton, *op.cit.*, p.124, n.1.

standing’ – he was remembered by an SLP comrade as imaginative, romantic, iconoclastic, absorbed by literature, particularly poetry, and by a fellow NSS&WCM leader as an impressive agitator and tactician.⁶³ He was a party man. He tutored Marxist classes and became a well-known propagandist who spoke against the war alongside John Maclean – although it was 1918 before he proposed a resolution which committed the CWC to active opposition.⁶⁴ An admirer of Connolly and devotee of Irish freedom, he was involved in printing a replacement for the suppressed *Irish Worker* and smuggling it to Dublin while he briefly deputised as editor of the *Socialist*.⁶⁵

Immersion in industrial issues combined with the lessons he drew from 1917 provoked him to ponder the efficacy of ‘socialist industrial unionism’; he came to accept the importance of soviets and a significant role for a combat party in a pre-revolutionary situation. He attended the 1917 Leeds Convention on soviets and, the following year, conferred with Lenin’s representative, Maxim Litvinov, embraced amalgamation of the socialist groups into a Communist Party, and subsequently received Russian funds.⁶⁶ In the 1918 ‘khaki election’, he opposed J.H. Whitley – inspiration of the Whitley Councils, a mechanism for co-opting the impulse that had created the shop stewards’ movement – at Halifax, winning 4,036 votes.⁶⁷ The lessons the stewards had learned now influenced the SLP which pledged itself to soviets and the dictatorship of the proletariat. He pursued merger with patience and determination. Working with the Comintern and the BSP, he was instrumental

⁶³ Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Home Front* (London: Hutchison, 1932), p.281; Brunel University, London, Special Collections, Harry Young, Harry’s Biography, ‘Impressions: Arthur MacManus’, p.2; Bell, op.cit., p.94; Murphy, op.cit.

⁶⁴ McShane and Smith, op.cit., pp.66, 95.

⁶⁵ Donal Nevin, *James Connolly: A Full Life* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2006), p.572.

⁶⁶ Kendall, op.cit., pp.196–219.

⁶⁷ Challinor, op.cit.pp.206–208.

in forming the CUG. Appointed chair of the ensuing Unity Conference in April 1920, he retained that position at the Foundation Convention and in the infant CPGB.⁶⁸

He was *primus inter pares* among its leaders and Britain's best-known Communist. 'MacManus', a fellow founder declared, 'is the brains and the storm centre of the revolutionary movement in this country and he will be the brains and storm centre of all that is to happen in the near future.'⁶⁹ That future looked bright. In 1920 he married Harriette 'Hettie' Wheeldon whom he had met in Derby in 1916. Sometime schoolteacher, suffragette and secretary of the local 'No Conscription Fellowship', she was the daughter of Alice Wheeldon and involved in a network helping conscientious objectors and men 'on the run'. She was exonerated in the trial and conviction of Alice on charges of conspiracy to assassinate Lloyd George manufactured by the informer Alex Gordon. The marriage was a happy interlude.⁷⁰ When Hettie died in childbirth the year the CPGB was founded, MacManus's life darkened.

His conversion to Communism hinged on working-class radicalisation and conviction that what had happened in Russia could happen in Britain. A repeat required soviets and a vanguard party. The Bolsheviks, MacManus asserted, had 'got to the roots and found a way out and what is of even greater interest is that they have found the way out to be by way of just such committees as we are building up in this country. They call them soviets, we call them workers' councils.'⁷¹ The De Leon-SLP conception of the party as a propagandist adjunct to the central agency of transition, the direct action of industrial unionists, gave way

⁶⁸ J.T. Murphy, A. MacManus, T. Bell and W. Paul, 'A Plea for the Reconsideration of Socialist Tactics and Organisation', *Socialist*, 30 January 1919; Challinor, op.cit., p.209; Macfarlane, op.cit., pp.29, 47–63; Kendall, op.cit., pp.196–219.

⁶⁹ NA, KV2/1867, David Ramsey [sic], Transcript of notes of a meeting, Croydon, 26 January 1919.

⁷⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, *Friends of Alice Wheeldon* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), passim; David Doughan, 'Wheeldon (née Marshall), Alice Ann (1886–1919)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography online (ODNB)*; John Jackson, 'Losing the Plot; The Trial of Alice Wheeldon', *History Today*, 57: 5 (May 2007), pp.40–48. Hettie's brother, William, a conscientious objector and SLP supporter, emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1921 and was executed under Stalin: *Independent*, 13 September 1992.

⁷¹ NSS&WCM Conference, 10–11 January 1920, quoted in Woodhouse, op.cit. p.54.

to the Bolshevik model: ‘The Russian Communist Party was the advance guard of the revolution ... the only organization to be found in Russia capable either in policy or courage to stand at the head of the greatest event in history ... the socialist movement internationally will fail in its most onerous duty if it neglects to profit from the experience.’⁷² Validating Lenin as the architect of international revolution presaged acceptance of his supremacy on all matters of doctrine and strategy, most immediately significant engagement with Parliament, the Labour Party and the trade unions. If, for MacManus, De Leon, sometimes referred to as the ‘the Pope’, had succeeded Leo XIII as a fount of authority, Lenin replaced him.⁷³ A need for certainty and veneration of success appear pertinent to a process lubricated by Soviet funds. Differences between Britain and Russia were minimized.⁷⁴ The workers’ committees had possessed potential. They were essentially vehicles of a sectional economism; based on skilled munitions workers, they constituted a defensive response to dilution and conscription. Far from being ‘built up’ by 1920, they had dwindled into insignificance.⁷⁵ The early CPGB operated on a mixture of traditional federalism, crude ‘centralization’ and incipient factionalism. How far he grasped the principles of Bolshevik organisation or possessed a coherent conception of the actuality of revolution in Britain and its mechanics, is questionable. He paid scant attention to the decline and extinction of the soviets and accepted the expanding dominion of bureaucratic centralism in the Russian party and Comintern.⁷⁶

His prestige flowed from his role in the major industrial movement of the war and the CPGB’s foundation. Cooperation with the Comintern and absence of competition played a part. If British Communists read Russian developments through a roseate lens, the Bolsheviks

⁷² Arthur MacManus, ‘The Third Anniversary’, *Communist*, 19 August 1920.

⁷³ For parallels between De Leon and Lenin and the latter’s approbation of the former, see Coleman, *op.cit.*, pp.161–164.

⁷⁴ Macintyre, *op.cit.*, p.231.

⁷⁵ John McIlroy, ‘A Brief History of Rank and File Movements’, *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, 44:1–2 (2016), pp.44–48.

⁷⁶ Macfarlane, *op.cit.*, pp.73–82; RGASPI, 495/100/61, Report of the Party Commission on Organisation Presented to the Fifth Congress of the CPGB, October 1922; RGASPI, 495/38/1, English Commission.

harboured exaggerated ideas about the NSS&WCM at its zenith. Lenin observed, ‘We are dealing with a profoundly proletarian mass movement which in the main stands on the basis of the fundamental principles of the Communist International.’⁷⁷ At its nadir in 1920, the NSS&WCM represented a remnant of the movement of 1916–1918. Even at its apogee, it was localised and imbued with wariness of central direction; the revolutionaries within it did not campaign for their beliefs.⁷⁸ Like other rank and filists, MacManus had relied on spontaneism and grassroots rebellion. He possessed little experience in the active construction of revolution and the interpenetration of politics and industrial action, mastery of which the Comintern demanded – or sustained revolutionary activity inside the trade unions. He had condemned the war in socialist meetings. Until the end, despite criticism from the anti-war leaders, John Maclean and Peter Petroff, he did not agitate against it in the workshops.⁷⁹ It would have been daunting and success improbable; that did not, in Bolshevik terms, preclude making a beginning. From 1921, his deficiencies as a political leader were exposed.

The party had been born in a world of recession which, combined with state repression, motivated working-class retreat. The CPGB’s membership was inflated. Many who had enrolled drifted out, leaving an over-staffed apparatus dependent on Russian subventions. Attempts to weld together a collective cadre encountered limited success; steps to coordinate activity in the unions, advance united front work and extend education, faltered.⁸⁰ Backed by ex-SLPers, cultivating superficially Communist intellectuals such as William Mellor and Francis Meynell, and working with the former BSPers Albert Inkpin and Fred Peet, he was an early advocate of one-man management who insisted all significant

⁷⁷ V.I. Lenin, *British Labour and British Imperialism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), p.220.

⁷⁸ McIlroy, *op.cit.*, pp.44–48.

⁷⁹ McShane and Smith, *op.cit.*, pp.78, 95; J.T. Murphy, *New Horizons* (London: Bodley Head, 1941), p.44; Hinton, *op.cit.*, pp.130–132.

⁸⁰ Hinton and Hyman, *op.cit.* pp.11–22; Kevin Morgan, *Labour Legends and Russian Gold* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2006), pp.34–54.

decisions went through his office. He resisted initiatives, animated by Rajani Palme Dutt, to reduce subsidies, prune the apparatus and implant Zinoviev's brand of 'Bolshevisation'. When he went undercover in 1921, party activity was dislocated.⁸¹ In a 1923 post-mortem in Moscow, some argued the party's problems could not be laid entirely at his door, indeed it was claimed that he had held it together.⁸² As one former SLP comrade turned bitter critic put it: 'How far Comrade MacManus is responsible for the terrible state of affairs will never be fully known. He has kept the strings of the Party entirely in his own hands'.⁸³ In this interpretation, he was a devious manoeuvrer who utilized his 'training in the Roman Catholic religion' and employed 'all the well-known Jesuitical methods' to defend his position and resist reform.⁸⁴

His political contribution was unimpressive. Murphy considered he 'was not a writer nor an organiser'.⁸⁵ His writings were stronger on rhetoric than strategy or tactics; the developing theoretical exposition that might be expected of an emerging Bolshevik leader was absent.⁸⁶ In the CPGB and the Comintern, as the party's representative in Moscow and as a member of the Comintern Executive (ECCI), he personified the journey from democratic values to authoritarian discipline.⁸⁷ In September 1921, he was captured for posterity by Sylvia Pankhurst, who disliked him but whose attitude to parliamentarianism, the Labour Party and democracy he had recently shared, as he presided over her expulsion: 'Comrade

⁸¹ RGASPI, 495/38/1, English Commission.

⁸² English Commission (Newbold). But see the critical comments of Gallacher and Hannington.

⁸³ RGASPI, 495/100/113, W.R. Stoker to Bucharin [sic], 22/23 February 1923. Stoker, who had been an SLP activist and a close friend of MacManus, speculated whether Hettie's death and the 'Peet-Inkpin association' had produced a deterioration in character: 'I would not exaggerate very much to class him as a moral degenerate'. On Challinor's account (op.cit., pp.111, 121) Stoker himself had suffered from alcoholism and mental problems.

⁸⁴ Stoker to Bucharin.

⁸⁵ Murphy, op.cit. 'MacManus'.

⁸⁶ Arthur MacManus Archive at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mcmanus/index.htm>. See, for example, 'The Spectre at the Feast', *Communist*, 23 December 1920: 'Our party is clear. Down with capitalism. Away with palliatives ... On with the revolution.'

⁸⁷ McIlroy and Campbell, 'The British and French Representatives to the Communist International', pp.208–212.

MacManus stated it was he who decides what work shall be allocated to members ...“We are not here to consider what good the *Dreadnought* might do but what harm it might do” said Comrade MacManus – his red silk handkerchief showing smartly from his pocket.’⁸⁸ Five months later, he remained silent at the ECCI as the Russian leaders read the riot act to Alexandra Kollontai and the Workers’ Opposition in the Russian Party. As Sheila Rowbotham reflected: ‘It was only two years since MacManus had chaired the British Shop Stewards’ Conference. But socialism, it now seemed, could brook no militant rank-and-file opposition.’⁸⁹ The independence and ecumenical approach of IWCE was no longer acceptable to him: the new party sought to control and, if that proved difficult, by-pass the Labour College movement and inoculate Communists against competing Marxist viewpoints.⁹⁰ His anti-Labourism was subdued as he debated CPGB affiliation to the Labour Party with Arthur Henderson and Sidney Webb in December 1921. On any reading, Royden Harrison’s characterization of his performance as ‘muddle-headed appeasement’ of those he had once savaged as ‘Labour fakirs’ seems unchallengeable.⁹¹ The ‘inimitable dialectical skill’ that Bell discerned in MacManus’s confrontation with Philip Snowden three years earlier was entirely absent on this occasion.⁹²

Political debilities were compounded by a dissolute lifestyle. Detached from his roots, confronting personal loss and an unprepossessing political predicament, he sought solace in alcohol. One youthful Communist remembered him, at a distance of fifty years, frequenting a Covent Garden pub resplendent in an 8 guinea Savoy Tailors’ Guild overcoat, smoking

⁸⁸ Barbara Winslow, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* (London: UCL Press, 1996), p.170; *Workers’ Dreadnought*, 27 August 1921.

⁸⁹ Rowbotham, op.cit., p.95.

⁹⁰ He had originally pledged partnership with the Labour Colleges and Plebs League: Macintyre, op.cit., p.81; RGASPI, 495/100/119, Marxist Education in Britain, 26 April 1923; RGASPI, 495/100/159, Statement on Policy to be Pursued by CPGB Members through the Plebs League and Labour College Movement, n.d. 1924.

⁹¹ Royden Harrison, Introduction to ‘Document: Communist Party Affiliation to the Labour Party: Transcript of Meeting of 29 December 1921’, *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 29 (1974), p.16. The transcript fails to justify Bell’s recollection (op.cit., p.194) that the CPGB delegation refuted the Labour leaders ‘point by point ... with simple working-class logic’.

⁹² Tom Bell, *British Communist Party: A Short History* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937), p.52.

expensive cigarettes and drinking Benedictine liqueurs at 2s 6d a glass when workers drank beer at 4d.⁹³ ‘Even a small quantity of drink throws him off balance’, a contemporary if not dispassionate source recorded, ‘I have seen him in such a condition that he is not to be trusted with information.’⁹⁴ Matters were not helped by an embryonic leadership cult around a figure sometimes styled the party’s ‘president’. Some raged against the ‘damned audacity and impudence’ of the chair requesting members rise to their feet as MacManus ascended the platform; apparently all complied.⁹⁵

The 1922 Dutt-Pollitt Report on Organisation – which recommended reforming the party’s structures and finances and turning to organized mass work – and the 1923 Comintern ‘English’ Commission – which restructured the leadership and reoriented the CPGB’s work in the unions and Labour Party – were milestones in his descent. Problems were reinforced by a breakdown in health. Despite abolition of the post of chair, he remained popular, coming third in the October 1922 EC elections with a vote only surpassed by Dutt and Pollitt, while Zinoviev was not prepared to remove him from the leadership in favour of such untested ‘new forces’.⁹⁶ He remained ‘under doctor’s orders’ at the start of 1924 and ill-health persisted to the end of his days.⁹⁷ Temporarily ‘off the payroll’, he spent much of 1923 and 1924 in Moscow as the CPGB’s Comintern representative but sought escape in assignments in America and South Africa which never materialised. His interest in Ireland remained strong and he was involved in efforts to foster a viable party there.⁹⁸ In 1924 he hit the headlines when the ‘Zinoviev letter’ exploded into the general election campaign. Allegedly

⁹³ Young, ‘Impressions’, pp.2–4. 8 guineas is £8.40 in decimal currency, around £500 at today’s values; 2s 6d is 30p; 4d is less than 2p.

⁹⁴ RGASPI, 495/100/113, Stoker to Bucharin. For a rather colourful account of MacManus’s drinking bouts in Moscow, see Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (London: John Murray, 1995), p.10.

⁹⁵ RGASPI, 495/38/1 (Hannington). The ambiguous response was: ‘I was so sick I could not say anything’ (MacManus); Young, ‘Impressions’, remembered that everybody stood.

⁹⁶ Macfarlane, *op.cit.*, p.82; RGASPI, 495/100/69, MacManus to EECI, 8 June 1923.

⁹⁷ RGASPI, 495/100/171, MacManus to Bob Stewart, 5 February 1924.

⁹⁸ Emmet O’Connor, *Reds and the Green: Ireland, Russia and the Communist Internationals, 1919–43* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004), pp.56, 68–69, 71, 76–78, 84, 88–89.

directives to the CPGB from the Russian leader and MacManus in Moscow, it instructed the party to prepare a British Red Army by building Communist cells in the armed forces.⁹⁹

He continued to support the Russian troika and the direction of travel of an increasingly Russian-dominated International. At the Fifth World Congress in summer 1924, as a member of the Presidium and Orgbureau of the ECCI and a candidate member of the Secretariat, he lined up to declare the Russian Left Opposition detrimental to the interests of the Comintern.¹⁰⁰ His contribution to the witch-hunt, a review of Trotsky's book on Lenin which *Labour Monthly* had favourably excerpted earlier, hung on ritualistic decoupling of the key leaders of 1917 and assertion that everything must be subordinated to the Russian majority. Trotsky's text, he claimed, was of poor literary quality, 'teeming with defects'; 'a complete failure', it should never have seen the light of day.¹⁰¹ Orthodoxy proved insufficient: by mid-decade he was in terminal decline as a leader. He displayed his increasingly erratic temperament in May 1925, when he resigned from the EC in protest against a decision that Pollitt rather than himself would open the annual Congress. He backed down when the Political Bureau called his bluff, explaining resignation was impermissible under party rules and threatened him with expulsion.¹⁰² His commitment was undeniable. Arrested with fellow leaders in October 1925, he rejected the judge's offer of being bound over if he renounced the CPGB and served six months in Wandsworth prison, emerging to play his old role of agitator in the General Strike.¹⁰³ His last endeavours were dedicated to the 'Hands Off China' campaign launched later that year. When he died in February 1927, the bad luck that had dogged his footsteps since 1920 persisted. The funeral had to be

⁹⁹ Gill Bennett, *The Zinoviev Letter: The Conspiracy That Never Dies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁰⁰ See John McIlroy, 'New Light on Arthur Reade: Tracking Down Britain's First Trotskyist', *Revolutionary History*, 8: 1 (2001), pp.20–47.

¹⁰¹ Arthur MacManus, 'Trotsky on Lenin', *Workers' Weekly*, 24 April 1925.

¹⁰² RGASPI, 495/100. 233, PB, 28 April, 12, 15 May 1925; Thorpe, 70.

¹⁰³ Macfarlane, *op.cit.*, pp.137–138, 179.

rescheduled as the Funeral Workers' Union refused to permit its members to work on Saturday afternoons. His ashes were buried in the Kremlin Wall.¹⁰⁴

The mind retains images of descent, isolation and inebriation in Moscow where some memorialized his 'gargantuan boozing ...there was a perpetually crucified expression on his countenance that all the Scotch whisky and Russian vodka in the world could not dispel.'¹⁰⁵

But the younger MacManus will be remembered as a fighter who emancipated himself from poverty, religion and syndicalism, and proved himself a charismatic, grassroots leader.

Gallacher wrote in 1918: 'Wherever Mac appears to find a job, the workers seem to turn to him instinctively to represent them. They know he is trustworthy and that he thoroughly understands their industrial needs ...the workers in Mile End are subscribing to give Mac a testimonial for his very valuable services as Convener of shop stewards.'¹⁰⁶ He was unable to transfer the qualities of leadership he had developed in the economic sphere to the demands of political leadership in 'a party of a new type'. That does not detract from his role in the making of the Communist Party. However, there was a downside for MacManus and his fellow shop steward leaders: 'even as they learned from the Bolshevik tradition they lost touch with some of the understandings they had so painfully gained themselves.'¹⁰⁷

Increasingly dependent, personally and politically, on the Russian connection as hopes of a breakthrough in Britain dissolved, the rebel became a conformist who died defending ideas and actions increasingly foreign to those of the SLP, the NSS&WCM, and Marxism.

A similar verdict might be passed on Thomas Hargrave Bell (1882–1944). Born in Glasgow's Great Eastern Road, a few miles from the Gallowgate in the rapidly industrialising village of Parkhead, he cast himself in his memoirs as an elder brother to the youthful

¹⁰⁴ RGASPI, 495/100/419, PB, 1 March 1927.

¹⁰⁵ Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p.212. He saw MacManus as afflicted with spy mania (200–220); Young, 'Impressions'.

¹⁰⁶ Gallacher to Bell, 24 November 1918, in Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit., p.158.

¹⁰⁷ Rowbotham, op.cit., p.91.

MacManus. If he lacked the latter's popular appeal and later excesses, he provides a further study in orthodoxy and subordination to Soviet authority, sometimes at odds with his bouts of independence in the SLP. The son of a steelworks labourer and a homeworking cotton spinner, he left school at eleven and worked at a variety of jobs including hawking Iron Brew – Scotland's other national drink – before completing an apprenticeship as an iron moulder. A youthful member of the ILP and SDF, in 1902 he came under the influence of older 'impossibilists' such as George S. Yates and was an SLP charter member. He studied philosophical, scientific, secularist and socialist literature, tutored classes in Marxism, attended technical courses and with MacManus enrolled in the West of Scotland Astronomical Society. He became an accomplished propagandist, active in both the Associated Iron Moulders of Scotland and the party-sponsored IWGB. The SLP stimulated or reinforced puritanical and faddish tendencies. A strict teetotaler who deplored the 'beer swilling' of the SDF leadership and considered alcohol 'the curse' of the working class and an instrument of proletarian corruption, he was a vegetarian and a disciple of 'physical culture' and 'clean living'.¹⁰⁸

He was not always a model member. In 1905 or 1906, he quit the SLP in protest at executive approval of De Leon's intervention in the IWW and was associated with Richard Dalglish's *The Decadence of the Socialist Labour Party*. The *casus belli* was that in contradiction to established doctrine, the IWW was not a socialist organization; that De Leon had supported the non-SLP Wobbly, 'Big Bill' Haywood, for gubernatorial office; and that the American party's engagement with the IWW risked subordinating the political to the economic. Bell recalled he was 'outside for nearly a year'; in reality it was April 1909 before he returned to the fold.¹⁰⁹ He disregarded the rules on boycotting office in reformist unions.

¹⁰⁸ Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit., passim.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.59; Kendall, op.cit., pp.70, 338, n.35; Challinor, op.cit., pp.47–48; Coleman, op.cit., pp.157–158.

The party had once sanctioned an activist for inadvertently being elected a branch auditor but things had changed when, intensely proud of his craft, he was elevated to the executive of the Iron Moulders and elected union president in 1918.¹¹⁰ It ‘was not without a big internal struggle’ that he vacated this post to become editor of the *Socialist*.¹¹¹ It is sometimes difficult when reading his memoirs, which proceed remorselessly towards the tabernacle of the CPGB, to isolate threads of ideological embroidery. Despite his involvement in the Iron Moulders, there may be some element of imposing the future on the past in Bell’s assertion that he was free of the SLP’s ‘dogmatic’ conceptions of trade unionism before 1914; and that on the outbreak of war he immediately regretted his party’s self-exclusion from the Second International and resolved to create a Third International cleansed of reformists.¹¹² It was 1919 before the SLP dropped its commitment to dual unionism, and while this was due *inter alia* to Bell and his fellow shop stewards, there is again little evidence of attempts on his part to actively support initiatives against the war beyond publicity in the *Socialist*. Nonetheless, he demonstrated a degree of political independence during these years absent in his later life.

The historiography depicts him as a leading light in the CWC and NSS&WCM. However, from autumn 1914 to autumn 1916 he worked in London and Liverpool. While he remained active, there is scant evidence he was a key figure in the NSS&WCM: he never served on the NAC and intelligence agents omitted to include him with MacManus, Murphy, Ramsay and Paul in the ‘inner circle’.¹¹³ There is little to suggest he took his self-avowed ‘attitude of open hostility and resistance to the war on socialist grounds’ into the shop stewards’ movement before 1918, when, with MacManus, he called on workers to halt the conflict.¹¹⁴ An early advocate of a Communist Party, he attended the Leeds Conference on

¹¹⁰ Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit., pp.60–65, 129–147; Coleman, op.cit., pp.157.

¹¹¹ Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit., pp.174.

¹¹² Ibid., 100, 102.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp.119, 121, 129; Rowbotham, op.cit., p.44, citing Ministry of Munitions reports (p.218,n.22).

¹¹⁴ Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit., pp.104, 153–154; Kendall, op.cit., pp.110, 130–131.

soviets, acted as MacManus's agent at Halifax, and established contact with Comintern representatives. He became acting secretary of the CUG: constructive in the eyes of the Comintern and BSP, his behaviour was unedifying from the vantage point of the SLP leaders. Refusing to accept or challenge the executive's decisions, he resigned as editor of the *Socialist* and used its membership lists to split the party. He quit his job in the Anchor Foundry in Glasgow in spring 1920, moved to London and, subsidised by Russian funds, worked full-time on the CPGB project. Shedding old ideas and attachments does not seem to have occasioned major qualms. Affiliation to Labour was difficult but he accepted the Founding Convention's decision and became the CPGB's first national organizer.¹¹⁵

He spent much of 1921 and 1922 in Moscow where he represented the party at the Comintern. He was elected to the ECCI, appointed to its Anglo-American Secretariat, and met and corresponded with Lenin. Back in London, he worked on colonial affairs, headed the Agit-Prop Department, engaged with party education, edited *Communist Review*, and settled into a paid, pedestrian dependence on the Soviet leaders that lasted for the rest of his life.¹¹⁶ He embraced each innovation from Zinoviev and Stalin's militarised conception of the party to 'socialism in one country', 'social fascism', 'defence of bourgeois democracy' – and much else. Opening the discussion on the Trotsky controversy in November 1924, he pronounced: 'The question of Trotsky is a question of discipline. We are not arguing or discussing the ideological approach of Trotsky to the question as a whole. Our party is concerned fundamentally with the question of discipline.'¹¹⁷ From disregard for ideas, he proceeded to contempt for facts and democratic values: 'we can still say quite fairly that there in our ranks still a large element of the democratic mind who do not like to come to decisions until they

¹¹⁵ Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit., pp.149–159, 174–195; Kendall, op.cit., pp.202–215, 252–253; Macfarlane, op.cit., pp.47–55.

¹¹⁶ Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit., pp.197–226; Thorpe, op.cit., pp.53–54; McIlroy and Campbell, 'British and French Representatives', op.cit., pp.208–212.

¹¹⁷ Minutes of the Party Council, 30 November 1924, reproduced in McIlroy, 'Arthur Reade', op.cit., p.35.

have got all the facts before them.’¹¹⁸ The sentiment summarises the sea change. In February 1924 he had provided an account of the differences in the Russian party in which Trotsky figured fairly favourably. In May 1924, he had characterised Trotsky as Lenin’s intimate collaborator.¹¹⁹ In November’s revised script, Trotsky was a problem. When the facts changed in Moscow, Bell changed with them.

Harry Pollitt, who worked with him in the early 1920s, recalled that it was this longstanding opponent of Labour Party affiliation who convinced him – an ex-BSPer – of its necessity. Bell also assisted him with advice on public speaking and reading Marxist texts, although ‘my comrades thought him dour and sullen’.¹²⁰ Harry McShane remembered him as ‘a very academic man’ but he was referring to Bell’s time in the SLP.¹²¹ He was an autodidact who evolved: from 1918 he relied on Soviet texts and was taught by Russian authorities. It started with Maxim Litvinov, who was able to induct him and MacManus into ‘the political implications of all our industrial activities and to lift us above the mentality of the pure and simple shop steward. I came away from London resolved that our Party had to become linked up with this great revolutionary movement going on in Russia.’¹²² His re-education continued with Lenin, his ‘guide, teacher and master’.¹²³ Kendall suggests that their earlier schooling in deference to De Leon’s party made it easier for the SLP leaders to transfer subservience to higher authority to the Russians. The SLP’s relationship with New York, however, was of a different scale and intensity than the CPGB’s relationship with Moscow. On what we know of him, Bell exhibited something less than the ‘almost theological devotion to De Leon’ and ‘fixation on the American SLP model’ that Kendall

¹¹⁸ Minutes of Party Council, 39.

¹¹⁹ Tom Bell, ‘The Crisis in the Russian C.P.’, *Communist Review*, February 1924; Macfarlane, op.cit., p.92; RGASPI, 495/100/153, Report on the Work of the Sixth Congress of the CPGB, 1924.

¹²⁰ Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1940), pp.124–125.

¹²¹ McShane and Smith, op.cit., p.53.

¹²² Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit., pp.149–150.

¹²³ Sixth Congress of the CPGB, 1924.

attributes to the SLP leaders.¹²⁴ These terms may, however, be appropriately applied to his attitude to Lenin, Stalin and the Soviet model. There were, of course, continuities between the SLP Bell and the Communist votary. But an autodidact past, antagonism to reformism and suspicion of bourgeois intellectuals marked innumerable Communists who had never been near the SLP. What stands out is his *political break* with pre-Communist theory and practice. In the CPGB he performed a range of roles in a fashion far from ‘academic’. His loyalty was underlined when he was imprisoned before the General Strike.¹²⁵ The distance he had travelled from earlier conceptions of socialism and internationalism was underlined, when in 1928, at the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern which launched Stalinization, he declared ‘Socialism is steadily being built up in the USSR.’¹²⁶

He was in his second term as CPGB representative in Moscow when Stalin initiated the Third Period. That he was a casualty had more to do with caution, lack of allies and others’ sense he was dispensable, than critical thinking on his part. Nonetheless, he demonstrated little initial inclination to return to the auto-anti-Labourism of his SLP days. His response to the recrudescence of ‘infantile ultra-leftism’ was to support the EC majority which asserted the continuing relevance of Lenin’s analysis of Labour.¹²⁷ As pressure mounted he trimmed but comrades detected ‘his old line mentality’.¹²⁸ At the December 1929 Party Congress, his plea that differences could not be resolved ‘by personal abuse, recriminations or by clearing everybody out’ fell on deaf ears and he failed to secure re-nomination to the EC.¹²⁹ In the ensuing decade he served as secretary of the Friends of the Soviet Union, undertook assignments for the Comintern in China and France, and headed the British section of the Comintern’s International Lenin School (ILS) in Moscow until the

¹²⁴ Kendall, op.cit., p.300.

¹²⁵ Macfarlane, op.cit., pp.137–138.

¹²⁶ *Inprecorr*, 17 September 1928.

¹²⁷ Thorpe, op.cit., pp.120–122; Branson, op.cit., pp.19–25.

¹²⁸ Branson, op.cit., p.47.

¹²⁹ Macfarlane, op.cit., p.239; Thorpe, op.cit., p.148.

school was liquidated by Stalin.¹³⁰ *The British Communist Party: A Short History*, which he published in 1937, attracted criticism from a popular frontist leadership bent on respectability; and a successful libel suit against Bell and the publishers, Lawrence and Wishart.¹³¹ Still in harness during the Second World War, he liaised with foreign Communists in Britain.

In 1910 he married Lizzie Aitken after a conventional courtship which commenced with two tickets to Harry Lauder. She was ‘always neatly dressed, of fine physique with a rare intelligence [and] from a good proletarian stock’ – her father, he noted, was a stonemason.¹³² His traditional inclinations, which sometimes verged on ‘respectable working-class’ superiority, moderated when it came to child rearing. Their eldest son, Oliver, was ‘brought up in the socialist faith’ and Bell found it ‘fitting that he should be an ardent shock brigade worker in the Soviet Union’.¹³³ The memoirs make no mention of their third son, Sidney – Laurence died young – who was involved in the Young Pioneers. They are equally silent about his relationship with Phyllis Neal, 12 years his junior, whom he met in Moscow in 1928–1929 where she was working with for the Comintern. There is no evidence that they married although she called herself ‘Phyllis Bell’ and when Lizzie died in Kirkintilloch in 1957 the death certificate described her as the widow of Thomas Bell.¹³⁴

Two Thwarted Theorists? Jack Murphy and William Paul

Oliver Bell’s response to the increasingly routine Comintern inquiry ‘Do you know any provocateurs and traitors?’ was in the affirmative: ‘Murphy – exposed 2 months ago in

¹³⁰ Kevin Morgan, ‘Bell, Thomas Hargrave (Tom)’, *ODNB*.

¹³¹ Allen Hutt, ‘Review’, *Labour Monthly*, June 1937; A.B. Elsbury, ‘Stalinist Corruption Exposed’, *Fight*, May 1938.

¹³² Bell, *op.cit.*, *Pioneering Days*, pp.88–90.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p.92; RGASPI, 495/198/942, Oliver Bell.

¹³⁴ NRS, Statutory Registers, Deaths, 1957, 498/185, Bell, Elizabeth.

British party'.¹³⁵ The prosaic reality was that Murphy had resigned from the CPGB in spring 1932 in a dispute over his proposal that the British government provide credits to facilitate purchase of British goods by the USSR. His refusal to recant provoked an almost parodic torrent of vituperation of a founder member who for a dozen years had 'worked and striven with fanatical devotion [and] performed feats of endurance and sacrifice'.¹³⁶ So far, our reconsideration of the careers of MacManus and Bell has complicated earlier historiographical conclusions. MacManus was not excluded from the leadership, his reduced influence was largely of his own making, and his tenure was only terminated by death. He was as orthodox and opportunist as anybody. It was a decade before Bell was removed – together with former members of the BSP. He never consciously stepped out of line and remained a loyal Stalinist until he expired. If he possessed theoretical ability, he applied it solely to elaborating Comintern doctrine. The career of John Thomas Murphy (1888–1965), considered by some historians to be a theorist of promise, prompts similar doubts about received verdicts.¹³⁷

Born into poverty in Manchester and raised in Sheffield, he left school at 13 to work at Vickers Engineering. His father was an Irish Catholic blacksmith's striker, his mother a Protestant domestic servant and housewife. He aspired to become a civil servant but abandoned the ambition when his father lost his job. A Primitive Methodist Sunday School teacher, lay preacher and teetotaler, extensive reading in philosophy, science and secularism and the influence of Darwin, Huxley and Spencer motivated rejection of religion. He qualified as a lathe turner, joined the ASE and became a shop steward, discovering Marx and Engels through wartime Labour College classes. An assiduous autodidact, he was slow to

¹³⁵ RGASPI, 495/198/942, Oliver Bell.

¹³⁶ J.T. Murphy, 'Forty Years Hard – For What?', *New Reasoner*, 7 (1958/1959), pp.119–124.

¹³⁷ See Hinton, *op.cit.*, *passim*, and Darlington, *Political Trajectory*, *op.cit.*, p.xix: 'J.T. Murphy was one of the most gifted of these self-taught intellectuals. Murphy more than anybody else developed and expounded a novel theory of independent rank and file organisation'.

come to politics. In his late twenties he was a supporter of the Amalgamation Committee, a leader of the Sheffield Workers' Committee and a critic of the trade union leadership's absorption in the war effort. He admired Connolly but remained a militant syndicalist who campaigned for industrial unionism and declined to join a socialist party until he was almost thirty.¹³⁸

In 1917 he was assistant secretary of the NAC of the NSS&WCM; the advisory council's function was to respond to grassroots initiatives and refer decisions back to the workers' committees, not apply proactive leadership. His pamphlet, *The Workers' Committee*, argued for a movement rooted in the workplaces, independent of the union leadership and capable of mobilizing to replace it. Based on participative democracy where the initiative lay with the rank and file and every worker thought and acted as a leader, guarding against bureaucracy and its corrupting influence, workers' committees could develop into a transformative industrial unionism which would lead the march to workers' power.¹³⁹ Murphy was active in the strikes that constituted the movement's major achievement, most notably the rolling stoppages against the conscription of the Sheffield engineer, Leonard Hargreaves. As he recorded: 'None of the strikes that took place during the war were anti-war strikes. They arose out of the growing conviction that the workers at home were the custodians of the conditions of labour for those in the armed forces as well as themselves.'¹⁴⁰ Like his other contemporary writings, *The Workers' Committee* said nothing about the war and little about the problems of revolutionary politics generally. The limitations of the movement were exposed with the ebbing of solidarity action through 1918 – there were

¹³⁸ RGASPI, 495/198/1235, J.T. Murphy, 29 January 1932; Darlington, *Political Trajectory*, op.cit., pp.1–53; Kendall, op.cit., pp.152–155; J.T. Murphy, *Preparing For Power* [1934] (London: Pluto Press, 1972), pp.106–175.

¹³⁹ J.T. Murphy, *The Workers' Committee* [1917] (London: Pluto Press, 1972); Hinton, op.cit., pp.233, 286, 293, 294; Kendall, op.cit., pp.161–165. In his Introduction to Murphy, *Workers' Committee*, op.cit., p.8, Hinton characterised it as 'one of the most sophisticated expositions of the revolutionary attitude towards trade union bureaucracy'.

¹⁴⁰ Murphy, *New Horizons*, op.cit., p.44.

no walk-outs when Murphy was victimized – and the NAC’s failure to press the issue when the question of halting the war came to the fore the same year. The NSS&WCM never pursued the SLP’s common ownership of industry; it reflected a rebellious, particularist economism rather than a proto-revolutionary movement.¹⁴¹

However, his ideas were changing. Influenced by MacManus, he acknowledged the need for a political ancillary to insurgent trade unionism; in mid-1917 he joined the SLP and was elected to its executive. ‘Our conception of the party’, he recalled, ‘was mainly that of a propaganda body enunciating principles, exposing capitalism and the class war but not understanding how to lead it.’¹⁴² Galvanized by 1917 and identifying the workers’ committees with soviets, he fought to turn the SLP towards workers’ councils, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and a new International, and fostered fusion with the SLP’s rivals to constitute a British Bolshevism – inasmuch as he grasped its meaning.¹⁴³ Competing understandings of revolutionary strategy surfaced at the Amsterdam Conference of the West European Bureau of the Comintern which he attended in early 1920. Its anti-parliamentary ethos and opposition to Labour Party affiliation coincided with his recharged antagonism to BSP ‘reformism’ and fears that it would dominate the new party.

Travelling to Moscow to attend the Second Comintern Congress, which met in July–August 1920, he reversed his stance on unity, criticised the BSP and aligned with the SLP executive in its opposition to Bell, MacManus and Paul.¹⁴⁴ At the Second Congress, he again changed horses, although the internal political ferment he had experienced since 1915 reached its terminus. Stirred by the citadel of Soviet success and its creator, he embraced Lenin’s conception of the party; the necessity for organised agitation inside reformist unions; the imperative of a new trade union international; the indispensability of utilising parliament

¹⁴¹ Darlington, *Political Trajectory*, op.cit., pp.41–46, 50–53; McIlroy, ‘A Brief History’, op.cit., pp.44–48.

¹⁴² Murphy, ‘Arthur MacManus’, op.cit.

¹⁴³ Kendall, op.cit., p.199; Challinor, op.cit., p.206–210.

¹⁴⁴ Kendall, op.cit., pp.207–209; Macfarlane, op.cit., pp.49–51.

as a platform; and, perhaps most reluctantly, the importance of affiliating to Labour as a means of engaging with reformist workers. Whatever his doubts, he left his history behind him. Nothing more was heard of his hostility to the BSP and reservations about unity.¹⁴⁵

He spent a dozen years in the CPGB as a full-time functionary. He acted as secretary to the Comintern representative, Borodin; worked to get the BBRILU off the ground; headed the Industrial and Parliamentary Departments; contributed to the Agit-Prop Department and reported for *Pravda*; stood in as party secretary; lived in Moscow for eighteen months as CPGB representative to the Comintern; and subsequently edited *Communist Review*. He had to learn on the job. But he was ambitious, and his formation had forged a critical thinker, although like many autodidacts he respected perceived authority. Admiration for Soviet power and those who wielded it nurtured aspirations to emulate them. With Dutt, he was arguably the best example of the Comintern intellectual in the CPGB leadership, but he possessed the advantage of a proletarian pedigree. That may have helped make friends in Moscow; it proved a dubious asset among fellow working-class party leaders who found him aloof and individualistic. Studious and hardworking, he was increasingly isolated, although his independence was always circumscribed by respect for Comintern policy. His dissection of the Dutt-Pollitt prescription for ‘Bolshevisation’ and alternative vision of an educated, participative membership, may be read at points as a critique of the militarised conceptions of the party current in the Comintern.¹⁴⁶ But he never questioned Zinoviev’s ‘Bolshevisation’ or strayed beyond its confines. In the 1924 debate over Trotsky, it was Murphy who moved the resolution: ‘The Party Council and Executive Committee of the CPGB records its solidarity and *implicit faith* in the Communist Party of Russia and the Executive Committee of the Communist International (emphasis added).’¹⁴⁷ His preface to the compendium, *The Errors*

¹⁴⁵ Darlington, *Political Trajectory*, op.cit., pp.76–84; Macfarlane, op.cit., pp.60–63.

¹⁴⁶ J.T. Murphy, ‘The Party Conference’, *Communist Review*, January 1924.

¹⁴⁷ McIlroy, ‘Arthur Reade’, op.cit., pp.41–42.

of *Trotskyism*, was an essay in orthodoxy. His conformity was rewarded when he received the accolade of moving Trotsky's expulsion from the ECCI.

His fidelity to the Kremlin and its perception in some circles as disloyalty to fellow leaders was underlined when, as CPGB Representative in Moscow, he capitulated to Stalin and, with Robin Page Arnot, published a Comintern-influenced critique of the mistakes the party leadership made around the General Strike. As opponents noted, he was part of that leadership and had participated in those errors.¹⁴⁸ His own muddled thinking in 1925–1926 produced contradictory and confusing positions:

On one analysis, a minority of union leaders were reliable. On the other, none were to be trusted. Yet in between presenting these rival interpretations, Murphy could denounce any attempt to set up *independent* Councils of Action at local or national level: 'there should be no rival body to the Trades Council ... We should avoid rivalry and recognise the General Council as the General Staff of the unions directing the unions in struggle.'¹⁴⁹

The following year he began to reassess the politics the party had pursued since 1923, although his conclusions on the need to turn left conformed with Comintern thinking. Thereafter, in harmony with Moscow, his approach morphed into the Stalinist sectarianism of 'Class Against Class'.¹⁵⁰ His progress was not without idiosyncrasy, highlighted by his proposal that the CPGB should solve the problem of the National Left Wing Movement (NLWM), a leftover from the united front period, by creating 'a third party', the Workers' Political Federation (WPF). His defence of an initiative seen as compromising the independence of the CPGB intensified his isolation. In September 1928, faced with innuendoes he was overly cash conscious and prioritised remunerated contributions to *Pravda* rather than writing unpaid for the party press, he resigned his party positions and only relented when Pollitt withdrew any implication he was governed by mercenary motives.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Thorpe, *op.cit.*, pp.97–102, 111.

¹⁴⁹ Hinton and Hyman, *op.cit.*, pp.34–35.

¹⁵⁰ Thorpe, *op.cit.*, pp.156–175, 180–185.

¹⁵¹ Darlington, *Political Trajectory*, *op.cit.*, pp.176–179, 184–185.

But he remained out on a limb in a leadership characterised by the Comintern leader, Manuilsky, as ‘a society of great friends’.

Family life provided some respite. In 1921 he had married Ethel ‘Molly’ Morris, a nurse and sometime militant suffragette, one of seven children raised in Salford by a mother who worked as a manager of a dairy. Only sporadically active in the CPGB, she described politics as her husband’s job, and her life seems to have revolved around their son, Gordon. Although her father had been a foreman, Molly saw herself as ‘lower middle class’, and, against the grain of CPGB politics, the couple sent Gordon to a ‘progressive’ but fee-paying private school. This may have caused financial difficulties, particularly when Murphy lost his post at *Pravda*, although Molly returned to work in private nursing homes.¹⁵² He seems to have been shocked by the inability of Third Period politics to deliver anything beyond disaster. Characteristically, his complaint was against the application of the line not the line itself; his critique remained within Comintern perspectives. By 1932, it was clear he was going nowhere in a party in which he lacked political purchase and a personal following and his patience snapped. The background was more important than the issue. His proposal for credits had previously been aired without great ructions. At a time of heresy-hunting, the charge he was attempting to reconcile international capitalism and the USSR hit home. But it was his restatement of the argument in an editorial in *Communist Review*, and, crucially, his refusal to recant, that propelled his exit. Resignation was followed by ritual expulsion.¹⁵³

He turned to the Labour Party, insisting that the project of an independent revolutionary organization was finished but Labour could be fashioned into an instrument of social transformation. In 1934, he became general secretary of the Socialist League,

¹⁵² Census of England, 1891, Chorley, Leyland, ED 5, Alfred Morris; Census of England, 1901, Salford, Pendleton, ED 44, Clara Morris; Molly Murphy, *Molly Murphy: Suffragette and Socialist* (Salford: University of Salford, 1998); Janet Hargreaves, ‘Molly Murphy (nee Morris): Nurse, Socialist and Suffragette’, *UK Association for the History of Nursing Bulletin*, 7, 1 (2019) at: <https://bulletin.ukahn.org/molly-murphy-nee-morris-nurse-socialist-and-suffragette/>.

¹⁵³ Darlington, *Political Trajectory*, op.cit., pp.205–216.

established to regroup the Labour left, resigning in 1936 to join the People's Front Propaganda Committee. During the war, he returned to work in the aircraft industry and in retirement published several books, including a hagiography of Stalin.¹⁵⁴ He continued to defend Russia before breaking with Marxism and finally politics *tout court*. His verdict on the party to which he had devoted his maturity was that, after decades of intense effort and financial subsidy, it was no more than a sect.¹⁵⁵ He differed from Bell and MacManus in that his membership of the SLP was shorter and his tenure on the CPGB EC longer and ended by his own decision. The SLP's long-term impact on him seems to have been minimal; scission rather than continuity marked his politics once he became a CPGB leader. Despite flashes of insight, he failed to develop the ideas or deliver on the promise of *The Workers' Committee*. He never called out the Comintern. The orthodoxy affirmed by his biographer has been denied by one commentator who claims he was 'regularly in opposition to the prevailing line of both the CPGB and the CI'.¹⁵⁶ The single example of transgression offered is the WPF. The error stems from conflating 'the prevailing line' and its application in Britain which, unless the Comintern intervened, permitted vigorous argument over how to tactically implement the line. As in the case of the WPF, Murphy engaged in the latter; he never challenged the Comintern's considered decisions.

Unlike Murphy, William Paul (1884–1958) shared the Clydeside background of Bell and MacManus. In contrast with Murphy, he had been a longstanding SLP member. Both gained reputations as fledgling theorists and both failed to add significantly to their laurels in the CPGB. Five years older than MacManus and Murphy, two years younger than Bell, in many ways Paul personified the working-class culture of the early twentieth century

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pp.234–260.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p.259.

¹⁵⁶ Matthew Worley, 'Reflections on Recent British Communist Party History', *Historical Materialism*, 4 (1999), p.251; and see John McIlroy, 'Critical Reflections on Recent British Communist Party History', *Historical Materialism*, 12 (2004), pp.132–133.

celebrated by Macintyre. He was born like Bell in Parkhead, but the family moved to the Gallowgate, where MacManus was raised, and by 1911 were living near Ibrox Park, home of Glasgow Rangers – a step up but still a working-class neighbourhood. Where Bell’s background was conventionally proletarian, and MacManus came from an immigrant family, Paul’s father was a storekeeper at a wine merchant’s and a travelling salesman. He was not destined for the factory: he worked at a jeweller’s and in 1911 described himself as ‘a painter/artist’.¹⁵⁷ By that time he was active in the SLP, which he joined in 1903, if we accept Bell’s account that the pair were trained by Yates, who left Glasgow in September that year.¹⁵⁸ Around 1912, he moved to England and combined commerce with politics. Establishing a drapery business via market stalls in Birmingham, Chesterfield, Manchester, Rotherham and Sheffield, he took advantage of each peregrination to develop educational classes and gain a foothold for the SLP.¹⁵⁹ As the party’s ‘national organiser’,¹⁶⁰ he was instrumental in extending its reach beyond Scotland. In the process, he broadened his horizons.

He was dedicated to IWCE, which burgeoned in the first twenty years of the new century as a Marxist but non-party movement in response to increased ruling-class interest in adult education. His party prioritised it: ‘the Socialist Labour Party is first an educational force. And this explains its success as an Agitational Force.’¹⁶¹ It viewed the intelligentsia and conventional education as little more than tools of capital. Paul explained: ‘This bias on the part of the professors completely vindicates the position regarding Social Science education adopted by the SLP and the Plebs League. These organisations contend that Labour

¹⁵⁷ NRS, Statutory Register of Births, 644/2, 1237, 11 August 1884, William Paul; Census of Scotland, 1901, 644/5, 37/20; Census of Scotland, 1911, 560/18/19.

¹⁵⁸ Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit., p.68; Kendall, op.cit., p.68.

¹⁵⁹ Rowbotham, op.cit., p.37. It is unclear whether Paul’s move to England was connected with his marriage to Janet, probably in 1912 – their daughter Margaret was born the following year (1939 Register of England and Wales). His family were connected with the rag trade: his brother was an agent for a linen manufacturer, his sister a drapery saleswoman (Census of Scotland, 1911).

¹⁶⁰ Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit., p.123.

¹⁶¹ Introduction to Paul, op.cit., p.vi.

must interpret Social Science in the light of its own class interest just as the scholars and intellectuals have done for the master class.’¹⁶² He was active in the League, formed after the 1908–1909 student revolt against bourgeois indoctrination at Ruskin College, and his book, *The State: Its Origin and Function*, on which his intellectual reputation rested, was based on lectures he gave to the Birmingham and Derby Social Science Classes.¹⁶³ Very much a product of its time, the book traced the development of the state from Athens and Rome through the Middle Ages to the rise of capitalism and its contemporary variants. It developed the *Communist Manifesto*’s maxim that the modern state was but an executive committee for administering the affairs of the entire capitalist class while stressing the expanding and oppressive role of education and the press and excoriating the extension of the state and its Fabian advocates. Competitive capitalism, he argued, provided little scope for ‘intellectual proletarians’ to advance their interests; increased state regulation not only strengthened capitalism but opened up opportunities for ‘well-paid official jobs’. Availing themselves of capital’s needs to channel industrial discontent, prosecute imperialist wars and control the working class, ‘socialist’ intellectuals were colonising the labour movement in order to campaign for increased state intervention and support which extended capitalist hegemony and would bring in its train:

armies of official bureaucrats who will only be able to maintain their posts by tyrannising and limiting the freedom of the workers ... the workers will be faced with a system reinforced by a gigantic army of State-subsidised officials who will fight like tigers to maintain their status and power. Such indeed is the logical outcome of State or National ownership ... Not only will Capitalism be strengthened as a consequence of state control, but it will dominate, in an ever-intensified form, the press and the educational forces.¹⁶⁴

Paul’s attempt to awaken workers to this coincidence between the interests of sectors of capital and proponents of labour movement reformism expressed in Fabian and ILP

¹⁶² Ibid., p.88.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p.vii.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p.183.

demands for state ownership of industry reflected both wider contemporary criticism of ‘the servile state’ as well as the position of the SLP.¹⁶⁵ The *Socialist* observed in 1916: ‘For over thirteen years we have sought to show that State Ownership was the final word in capitalist domination, that it was pregnant with sinister danger for workers.’¹⁶⁶ Published the same year as the Bolshevik revolution, the text was marked by De Leonist ideas: ‘socialist industrial unionism’, the central agency of revolutionary change, would take over the means of production, possibly in peaceful fashion and establish a system of workers’ self-government.

Moreover:

The modern capitalist State, the last in the series, will pass away with the inauguration of Industrial Democracy. Socialism will require no political State because there will be neither a privileged property class nor a downtrodden propertyless class; there will be no social disorder as a result because there will be no clash of economic interests; there will be no need to create a power to make ‘order’. Thus, as Engels shows, *the state will die out*. (original emphasis)¹⁶⁷

There is no room in Paul’s vision of transition for the dictatorship of the proletariat as an intermediate stage – or its corruption into Stalin’s all-encompassing, brutally exploitative state. There is no mention of soviets or workers’ committees. This underlines how far his thinking changed between its publication in 1917 and the foundation of the CPGB; and how little it changed in response to developments after 1920. The wealth of reference in the text goes some way to explain Macintyre’s description of him as a ‘worker-intellectual polymath’.¹⁶⁸ The quality of exposition justifies a government informer’s view that he was ‘a writer of some power and distinction’.¹⁶⁹ The rigorous content and recommendations for further reading evoke the demands placed on students in IWCE classes. It was used in early CPGB schools but passed into an obscurity from which republication in the 1970s only briefly rescued it.

¹⁶⁵ Hinton, *First Shop Stewards*, op.cit., pp.29–55.

¹⁶⁶ *Socialist*, October 1916.

¹⁶⁷ Paul, *State*, op.cit., p.198.

¹⁶⁸ Macintyre, op.cit., p.198.

¹⁶⁹ Rowbotham, op.cit., p.87.

At the start of the war he settled at ‘Pen Bryn’, Littleover, near Derby, where he pursued a complicated life as a businessman, market stall holder and agitator, indefatigable SLP activist and prolific writer who authored the SLP’s *Socialism and the War* and for a time edited the *Socialist*. A friend of the Wheeldons, he was at the centre of intersecting networks of anti-war campaigners, conscientious objectors, Marxist educators and shop stewards.¹⁷⁰ He was neither a munitions worker nor a union representative, yet his fertile collaboration with the shop stewards as advisor and agitator demonstrates how non-participant SLP members could become creatively involved in workers’ struggles. The Ministry of Munitions Intelligence Unit described him as a ‘Prominent Socialist, holds classes, was mixed up in the Clyde trouble. Is in correspondence with MacManus and Murphy. Probably the most dangerous man of the lot.’¹⁷¹ Called up in 1916, he took advantage of a deferral on ‘business grounds’ to ‘go on the run’ and temporarily relocated to London where he completed *The State* in the British Museum.¹⁷²

He trod the same path towards the CPGB as Bell and MacManus. As the SLP candidate at Ince, near Wigan, in the 1918 general election, he stood on a programme which in anticipation of a new socialist world mimicked Woodrow Wilson’s ‘14 points’ for the peace settlement – the manifesto began: ‘We affirm that all land, railways, mines, factories, means of transportation, shall become the Communist Property of the people ... Social classes thus being abolished, no person shall have the power to employ other people for private profit.’¹⁷³ Announcing his support for the Bolsheviks, he declared: ‘I don’t know how many votes will be cast for me and I don’t care. The fight as a piece of propaganda is the greatest educational campaign the SLP has ever undertaken.’¹⁷⁴ He polled 2,231 votes as

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., passim.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p.87.

¹⁷² Imperial War Museum, Lives of the First World War, William Paul, at: <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/lifestory/7655157>

¹⁷³ Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit.,p.156,

¹⁷⁴ Challinor, op.cit., p207.

against 14,882 for the miners' leader and Labour supporter of the Coalition government, Stephen Walsh.

He was involved in drafting 'A Plea for the Restoration of Socialist Tactics and Organisation' which in January 1919 set in motion a fundamental reorientation of the politics of the SLP in the direction of Bolshevism and a united Communist Party.¹⁷⁵ The latter was his preoccupation. He was an SLP man to his fingertips. But he had no hesitation about launching the CUG in March 1920. He believed that the SLP leadership's insistence that the BSP demonstrate that a majority of its members opposed Labour Party affiliation was impossible to fulfil and would extinguish any prospect of merger. The SLP was indulging in sectarianism in the true sense of the term: it was placing its historic hostility to the BSP and its long-nurtured independence and defence of principle, which could remain the subject of struggle inside a new party, above the long-term interests of the working class. He pressed on, establishing a CUG section in Derby, although one historian has castigated the breakaway leaders for adopting 'a two-faced attitude' by suggesting to potential supporters they would not join a new Communist Party unless it opposed Labour Party affiliation; while at the same time presenting a conciliatory face to the BSP.¹⁷⁶

At the Foundation Convention, he was chosen to put the case against the CPGB affiliating to the Labour Party. The CUG's compromise with SLP principles almost paid off but its position was narrowly defeated by 100 votes to 85. What was, in retrospect, remarkable about his speech was its rejection of Lenin's advice in *Left Wing Communism* and his plea that the new party should base itself on critical thinking and trust to its own judgements:

There is not one in this audience to whom I yield in my admiration for Lenin but, as we said yesterday, Lenin is no pope or god ... on international tactics we will take our international principles from Moscow where they can be verified internationally; but

¹⁷⁵ *Socialist*, 2 January 1919.

¹⁷⁶ Macfarlane, op.cit., p.55; Graham Stevenson, 'Paul, Willie', at: <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2008/09/19/william-paul/>.

on local circumstances where we are on the spot we are the people to decide ... our Comrade Lenin would not have us slavishly accept everything which he utters ... The very warp and woof of our propaganda is criticism and as we believe in criticism, we are not above criticising Lenin.¹⁷⁷

He was a member of the Provisional ECs which emerged from the Convention and the January 1921 Congress; but he neither featured on the committee thereafter nor occupied other positions of the first rank. With respect to Paul, there is little substance in the statement of one recent writer: 'such former SLP stalwarts as Jack Murphy, Arthur MacManus, Tom Bell and William Paul became central figures in the early CPGB'.¹⁷⁸ He visited Moscow to elicit subsidies and between 1921 and 1923 his talents were employed as editor of *Communist Review*.¹⁷⁹ He was as adept at arguing the politics of his new party as he had been in advocating the policy of the SLP. Harold Laski praised his 1922 defence of the CPGB's ideas: 'Mr Paul's book is easily the best English exposition of the Communist position.'¹⁸⁰ In keeping with the former SLPers' declaration that they would abide by the decision on affiliation, he made no attempt to reopen the issue. Instead, he joined the Labour Party he once savaged and was adopted as Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for the leftwing Rusholme Constituency in Manchester.

The SLP was history as he stood as an official Labour candidate in the December 1923 general election – coming third behind the Liberal and Unionist candidates with a respectable 5,366 votes – and again in 1924 as a Communist candidate, maintaining his position with 5,328 votes.¹⁸¹ His contacts with the Labour left, Plebs League and Labour Colleges proved useful when the CPGB embarked on the NWLM the following year and in

¹⁷⁷ *Official Report of the Communist Unity Convention* (London: CPGB, 1920), p.35.

¹⁷⁸ Nor is any evidence adduced to support it in Mathew Worley, *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), p.2 and n.5.

¹⁷⁹ *Communist*, 30 September 1920; RGASPI, 495/100/20, A. MacManus and A. Inkpin to Kobetsky, 15 March 1921.

¹⁸⁰ William Paul, *Communism and Society* (London: CPGB, 1922); Harold J. Laski, *Communism* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1927), p.207, note 1.

¹⁸¹ Klugmann, *Vol. I*, op.cit., pp.361, 368.

March 1925 he was appointed editor of the *Sunday Worker*. The weekly was launched by King Street to organise and ‘clarify’ the Labour left and bring a readership in the constituencies, trade unions, the Minority Movement and IWCE closer to Communism. Its coverage of literature, music, the theatre, film criticism and education, extensive and accessible in comparison with other CPGB organs, was in tune with his inclinations. But it was a paper with a purpose, subsidised by the Comintern to win recruits, not indulge in peaceful co-existence as the price for joint action with the left. While space was allocated to left reformists, party personnel were at hand, when appropriate, to provide the necessary corrective.¹⁸² The line between drawing in left-wingers and giving too much ground to reformism, thus blunting the critical edge of the united front, was always difficult to negotiate. That Paul was not entirely trusted to get things right and might be susceptible to over-indulging the left – as well as the fact that he was far from ‘a central figure in the party’ – was suggested by the appointment of Andrew Rothstein, who had a direct line to Moscow, to supervise the paper, and perhaps confirmed when Paul was replaced as editor by the ultra-orthodox Walter Holmes.¹⁸³

His activity in the Plebs League did not survive the decade. Party leaders could not decide whether to destroy the League or take it over and there was increasing tension on its executive between the Communists – Paul, Maurice Dobb, Tommy Jackson and Eden and Cedar Paul – and former Communists such as Frank Horrabin, Raymond Postgate and Ellen Wilkinson. Differences intensified in early 1927 when Paul attacked the League’s pamphlet on the General Strike as excessively conciliatory to the TUC and Horrabin and Postgate

¹⁸² See Parker, *op.cit.* For a positive view of the *Sunday Worker*, see Jonathan Rée, *Proletarian Philosophers: Problems in Socialist Culture in Britain, 1900–1940* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp.51–54; Thorpe, *op.cit.*, pp.81, 104.

¹⁸³ RGASPI, 495/100/243, Memoranda and Correspondence relating to the *Sunday Worker*.

vigorously defended it.¹⁸⁴ But the real problems were financial and by the end of the year the League had been substantially incorporated into the NCLC.

Of secondary standing after 1922, Paul took no part in the national leadership of the CPGB after 1928. He remained an active party member locally, albeit decreasingly, for the next three decades, contributing in the 1930s to the Derby Labour College and the Left Book Club, to Anglo-Soviet Friendship meetings in the 1940s and the Derby Peace Council in the 1950s.¹⁸⁵ He was an engaging and gregarious personality and accomplished speaker, although one comrade remarked, ‘Racy and volatile, he often missed fire by too great eagerness to score a point... This led him frequently to strain after a facetious comment at the expense of an opponent.’¹⁸⁶ He was active in the Workers’ Theatre Movement and reports of Plebs Meets and socialist gatherings refer to his ‘powerful and expressive baritone’ rendering a range of songs from contemporary socialist anthems to Chartist hymns and laments from the Irish potato famine.¹⁸⁷ But in the party he was neither fish nor fowl, unable or unwilling to follow Bell, MacManus and Murphy as political leaders while marginalised on the intellectual front by petit-bourgeois exegetes like Dutt and Rothstein. What is clear from his sustained fidelity is that despite his wise words at the Foundation Convention, the iconoclasm of his youth and the rethinking which informed his activity between 1917 and 1920, the creation of the CPGB represented a *caesura*. Any political thinking he did after 1928 was, in relation to practice, within the framework of Stalinism. He accepted without evident dissent every phase of Soviet policy and before he died in 1958, one of his last acts was to leave his beloved books to the CPGB.

¹⁸⁴ RGASPI, 495/100/417, CC, 6/7 March 1927, Thomas Bell, Memos on ‘Workers’ Education’ and ‘The Plebs and the NCLC’; *Sunday Worker*, 6, 13 February 1927.

¹⁸⁵ Stevenson, op.cit; Graham Stevenson, ‘People’s History of Derbyshire’, vol.3, ch.11, at: <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2017/12/18/chapter-eleven/>

¹⁸⁶ Bell, *Pioneering Days*, op.cit., p.192.

¹⁸⁷ John Mahon, *Harry Pollitt: A Biography* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), p.35; Rowbotham, op.cit., p.15.

Conclusion

Prosopography provides precision. Statistical examination of former members of the SLP and BSP who sat on the CPGB EC before the Third Period upheaval confirms that the ex-SLP cohort featured disproportionately in the party leadership. Despite a dip in their representation in 1922–1923, they maintained near parity with ex-BSPers on the four ECs between 1924 and 1927 (**Table 1**). There is no warrant for assertions that their numbers were significantly reduced during ‘Bolshevisation’. They dominated organising posts through the decade, although ex-BSPers held most national offices. The figures provide no basis for claims the SLP contingent was replaced by former BSPers. While the two groups in aggregate made up at least half, often substantially more, of the representatives on ECs before 1929, both lost ground to activists with different political lineages. It was elements like Dutt and Page Arnot, with no experience in what they disparagingly referred to as ‘the sects’, and then relative newcomers with no pedigree in either the BSP or SLP like Peter Kerrigan and Robert Robson, as well as graduates from the ILS, who ‘squeezed out’ both ex-BSPers and SLPers from 1929. Between 1920 and 1929, the leadership tenure of the majority of both groups was short-lived: 58% of SLP and 67% of BSP veterans served on only 1 or 2 ECs while only 3 members of each contingent served on 6 or more. This latter ‘core’ embraced Bell, MacManus and Murphy from the SLP and Gallacher, Inkipin and Pollitt from the BSP. This dispels, at least in numerical terms, the notion that the prominence of ex-SLP members was confined to the CPGB’s first years and was supplanted by mid-decade by an ex-BSP ascendancy. Rather, the former SLP representation declined from 1929, and ‘the Big Four’ were all absent from the EC by 1933, while ‘the Big Three’ ex-BSPers, Campbell, Gallacher and Pollitt, continued into the leadership into the 1950s – a point to which we return.

The former SLP cohort was overwhelmingly proletarian. Moreover, over 60% were associated with the NSS&WCM and the miners' unofficial reform movements, while MacManus, Murphy and Ramsay held leading positions. In comparison, less than 30% of the BSPers were connected with the wartime movements and only Gallacher could claim an important role, largely limited to the CWC. This may have prompted the Russians to conclude that SLP activists possessed the potential to become Bolshevik leaders. Moscow's superficial knowledge of the British left may have suggested that the SLP's dedication to Marxism and revolutionary discipline provided a superior schooling for future cadres than a BSP only recently rid of opportunism and Hyndman – particularly in the industrial sphere. The majority of SLPers listed in **Appendix 1**, however, furnished us with few indicators that in 1920 they possessed outstanding leadership qualities; nor did they exercise significant influence in the party after that date. No less than 10 of the 14 who featured on the EC in the first years – Clark, Cook, Hewlett, Lavin, MacDonald, McGeachan, McLean, Ramsay, Silvester and Webb – had left it by the end of 'the long foundation period' in 1923. Although 3 would briefly return later in the decade, 7 had disappeared from the CPGB by that date.¹⁸⁸

There are few signs they were 'elbowed out' in favour of opportunist ex-BSPers – of those listed above, only Clark is on record as expressing critical views inside the CPGB. It is simplistic to characterise fissures in the leadership between 1920 and 1923 in terms of an ex-SLP/BSP dichotomy. The core of the group around MacManus *were* ex-SLP. But it possessed a strong Scottish complexion, Dundee's Bob Stewart, formerly with the Socialist Prohibition Fellowship, took a significant part and they collaborated with the ex-BSPers, Inkpin and Peet. The competing caucus was directed by Dutt, who, like most of his intellectual supporters, was not from the BSP, and although Gallacher and Pollitt were

¹⁸⁸ Clark and Ramsay were not EC members in the first years, but the former worked at the party centre and then as Glasgow organiser, while Ramsay was engaged on Comintern work. He was elected to the EC in 1926 and 1927 but after a spell as Scottish Organiser never returned to the leadership. Clark refused to accept election to the 1926 EC and left the CPGB shortly afterwards: KV2/1869, David Ramsey, [sic]; KV2/584, Thomas Clark.

prominent, tensions had more to do with novel issues such as ‘Bolshevisation’ and Comintern subsidies than red lines between the SLP and BSP. Personal antipathies and competition for paid posts contributed. The most plausible deduction we can make is that friction was always likely as part of the ‘bedding down’ process in a new party assembled from rival organisations. But political identities had already shifted significantly between 1917 and 1920; and after 1923 and the Comintern’s ‘English’ Commission, tensions subsided and incipient factionalism faded.¹⁸⁹

The influence of ‘the Big Four’ diminished but at varying rates and they were not victims of ‘Bolshevisation’. Paul was never central and played a supporting role after 1922; but MacManus, a declining force after 1923, retained his place at the top table until his death; Bell remained in the leadership until 1929; and Murphy until he quit the party in 1932. There is no evidence they were ousted by, or in favour of, ex-BSPers who were more opportunist and orthodox. Paul may have been perceived as soft on the Labour left; but the reasons for his retirement from the national stage in 1928 remain obscure. Whatever their positions on particular tactical issues, all remained within the bounds of Comintern ‘legality’ before Murphy’s resignation in 1932. There is little to suggest that they were any less amenable to Moscow than Gallacher and Pollitt. Bell’s removal in 1929 was unwitting, his reluctance to change muted in comparison with the attitude of the ex-BSPers, J.R. Campbell and Andrew Rothstein.

Whether the promise some discerned in their pre-1920 activity was redeemed is questionable. Successful leadership is the outcome of interaction between its agents and a range of constraints including fellow potentates, party members, the Comintern, and, crucially, the opportunities and circumscriptions afforded by the economic and political environment. Transferability between contexts is a perennial issue for leadership, and the

¹⁸⁹ RGASPI, 495/38/1, English Commission.

roles Bell, MacManus, Murphy and Paul played in the shop stewards' movement were different from the roles required of CPGB cadres. The objective factors which favoured the advance of a rank-and-file movement were transformed from 1920. The conjuncture militated against welding the CPGB into an efficient, proto-Bolshevik entity and its leadership into a Leninist cadre. If constraint was paramount and restricted opportunities, overall 'the Big Four' failed to demonstrate 'outstanding qualities of leadership', political or theoretical. If they had achieved 'a remarkable level of theoretical maturity'¹⁹⁰ by 1920, the new 'Leninism' was different from the old De Leonism they had been schooled in and they failed to develop significantly in the challenging environment which shaped the ensuing decade. A blunting of theoretical acuity may, as has been suggested, be attributed in some degree to preoccupation with quotidian activity.¹⁹¹ But it was surely bound up with their subordination to a canonical authority resistant to any theoretical innovation which strayed beyond the confines of 'Leninism', 'socialism in one country', 'social fascism' and the interests of the Soviet state. The CPGB's lack of theoretical clarity cannot be explained by focussing on the former leaders of the SLP – only by consideration of the Communist leadership as a whole in the context of its self-willed, constrictive intellectual subservience to the Russian elite.¹⁹²

A difficulty with the historiography is the sparsity of evidence which suggests the continuation of an SLP tradition or character beyond 1922, as well as the over-deterministic and homogenising tendency of the ex-SLP and ex-BSP wrappers to downplay change, compress diversity and attribute continuing positive and negative political traits to the respective organisations. The SLP was never *that* cohesive and its history as well as our survey of the 19 activists listed in **Appendix 1** and the distinctive roads they took as

¹⁹⁰ Hinton and Hyman, *op.cit.*, p.69.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.70; Murphy, 'Party Conference', *op.cit.*

¹⁹² For developments in Russia and their impact on the Comintern and its affiliates, see John Mellroy and Alan Campbell, 'Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: A Historical Controversy Revisited', *Labor History*, 60, 3 (2019), pp. 165–192.

Communists undermine notions of a relatively static, broadly uniform identity. Similar considerations apply to the more amorphous BSP and disable attempts to construct a binary opposition between the two sets of actors. When we return to the three former members who survived in the CPGB leadership into the 1950s, it is to discover that their ‘BSPness’ and its resilience in the 1920s, is far from readily apparent. Reputed to have joined the BSP around 1912, Campbell’s only significant engagement in that party occurred after he was demobbed in 1918. Gallacher, an SDF member from 1906, attended and spoke at party conferences. But he was fundamentally a syndicalist whose politics, his biographer concluded, were close to those of the SLP and IWW.¹⁹³ His recollection in his not always reliable memoirs was that in 1920, when his syndicalism was targeted by Lenin, ‘the shop stewards’ movement was still comparatively strong and I had little regard for parties and still less for parliament’.¹⁹⁴ Pollitt’s political direction of travel before 1920 was similar: away from the BSP towards the syndicalist-inflected left. Despite his roots in the BSP, he joined the very different WSF.¹⁹⁵ By 1920, Bell had to persuade him of the desirability of Labour Party affiliation; thereafter, his Svengali was the non-BSP ‘new man’, Dutt.

The political allegiances of many in our group became increasingly fluid after 1917 and the Foundation Convention put in place the rudiments of a new political identity. Inevitably, this would take time to fully develop. But the historiography exaggerates the continuing influence of a vanishing world and past politics of diminishing relevance to the leaders of British Communism. ‘The long foundation period’ between 1920 and 1923 was a time of ‘bedding down’ and realisation of the implications of what the Convention delegates had decided at London’s Cannon Street Hotel in July–August 1920. The foundation of the

¹⁹³ Robert Duncan, ‘Gallacher, William (1881–1965)’, *ODNB*.

¹⁹⁴ Gallacher, *op.cit.*, p.251.

¹⁹⁵ Pollitt, *Serving My Time*, p.91; Thorpe, *op.cit.*, p.22.

CPGB represented a watershed. Thereafter, incrementally but irresistibly, revolutionary politics in Britain were played by different rules.

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Table 1. Membership of CPGFB ECs 1920–1928 by previous political affiliation.

	July 1920	Jan. 1921	April 1921	Mar. 1922	Oct. 1922	End 1923	May 1924	May 1925	Oct. 1926	Oct. 1927
SLP	4 (29)	7 (37)	7 (39)	9 (38)	3 (33)	3 (18)	6 (26)	5 (25)	8 (24)	7 (23)
BSP	8 (57)	7 (37)	5 (28)	8 (33)	4 (44)	8 (47)	8 (35)	6 (30)	9 (26)	8 (27)
Other	2 (14)	5 (26)	6 (33)	7 (29)	2 (22)	6 (35)	9 (39)	9 (45)	17 (50)	15 (50)
Total	14 (100)	19 (100)	18 (100)	24 (100)	9 (100)	17 (100)	23 (100)	20 (100)	34 (100)	30 (100)

Note: The July 1920 EC was made up of representatives elected at the Founding Conference and group representatives on the Provisional Committee which had finalized preparations for the Conference; the January 1921 EC was elected via a mix of appointment by the constituent parties and election by members grouped in regional divisions; the 9-man committee elected in October 1922 was expanded over the following year, the additions arising largely from the ‘English’ Commission in Moscow in June-July 1923.

Sources: See note 34.

Table 2. CPGB offices held by former members of the SLP and BSP.

CPGB office	Former SLP members	Former BSP members
BBRILU/MM Executive	5	6
Comintern or RILU Congress delegate	6	7
ECCI member	3	3
CPGB Rep to Comintern/RILU/YCL	7	3
National/Scottish organiser or Head of Party Department	9	2
District Organiser	3	0
National office holder*	1	6
Editor of party publication	3	3
Communist MP	0	2
Officer of satellite organisation	1	4

Notes: Multiple offices held by an individual are listed separately.

*Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, Assistant or Acting Secretary, Treasurer.

Sources: Compiled from Appendices 1 and 2

Table 3. The number of CPGB ECs on which former SLP and BSP members served 1920–1928.

Number of ECs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
Ex-SLP	4	7	2	2	1			2	1		19
Ex-BSP	10	6	1	1	3	1	1			1	24

Sources: See note 34.

Appendix 1: Former Members of the SLP who served on the CPGB Executive Committee, 1920–1928

Name Date/place of birth Nationality	Social origins	Occupation	Other pre-CPGB affiliations	ECs 1920-28 EC post-1928?	Joined/left CPGB. CPGB office
William ALLAN 1900, Blantyre ,Lanarkshire Scottish	Working-class F: Coal miner	Coal miner; checkweighman; union official.	Scottish Miners' Section, NSS&WCM	2 Yes	1923; left 1956 (d.1970) Secretary, Lanarkshire Miners' MM; CPGB Rep. to RILU; Secretary, MM
Thomas Hargrave BELL 1882, Parkhead, Glasgow Scottish	Working-class F: Steelworker	Iron moulder; munitions worker; journalist.	ILP; SDF; IWGB; CWC; NSS&WCM; CUG.	8 Yes	1920 (d.1944) NO; Head, Agit-Prop Dept; Comintern Cong.Del.; ECCI; CI Rep.; Editor; Friends of the Soviet Union; ILS section head.
William Thomas BRAIN 1891, Birmingham English	Working-class F: Blacksmith	Blacksmith.	NSS&WCM	4 No	1920 (d.1961) DO; BBRILU; Agit-Prop; Midlands Organizer RILU; Comintern Cong.del.
Thomas CLARK 1875, brought up in Glasgow Scottish	Working-class F: Tailor	Engineer (turner); union official.	Treasurer, CWC; NAC of NSS&WCM; CUG.	1 No	1920; expelled 1928 (d.1943) Scottish Organizer
Alfred Egbert (A. E.) COOK c.1891		Businessman.	CUG; SWCC	2 No	1920 Parliamentary Dept.
Aitken FERGUSON 1890, Glasgow Scottish	Working-class F: Ironmoulder	Boilermaker.	SWC	4 No	1921 (d.1975) DO; Scottish Organizer
Owen FORD 1882, near Sheffield English	Working-class F: Coal miner	Coal miner; Checkweighman.		1 No	1920 (d.1977) DO

William J. HEWLETT 1876, Penalt, South Wales Welsh	Working-class F: Tin works labourer	Coal miner.	Unofficial Reform Committee; SWSS; SWCC; CUG	2 No	1920 (d.1921) RILU del.
Thomas Alfred JACKSON 1879, London English	Working-class F: Compositor	Compositor; social/political lecturer; writer.	SDF; SPGB; CUG	5 Yes	1920 (d.1955) Editor; DO
Patrick “Paddy” LAVIN 1881 Irish	Working-class	Coal miner; secretary, SLC; Comintern worker; translator and journalist.	ILP	2 No	1920; left 1923 CI rep.
Joseph MacDONALD			CLP	1 No	1921
Arthur MacMANUS 1888, Glasgow Scottish	Working-class F: Packer; engineman	Engineer; munitions worker.	IWGB; CWC; NSS&WCM; CUG	9 No	1920 (d.1927) Chair; Comintern Cong.del.; ECCI; CI Rep.
Alexander McGEACHAN 1888, Glasgow Scottish	Working-class F: Baker	Engineer; unemployed; insurance agent.	IWGB; CLP	2 No	1921 (d.1962)
John McLEAN 1891, Glasgow Scottish	Working-class F: Blacksmith; engine driver	Labourer.	Scottish Workers’ Committee; Communist League; CLP	2 No	1921
John Thomas MURPHY 1888, Manchester English	Workng-class F: Blacksmith’s striker	Clerk; turner in toolroom; munitions worker.	NSS&WCM	8 Yes	1920; left 1932 → LP/Socialist League (d.1965) BBRILU; Comintern Cong.del.; ECCI; CI rep.; Acting CPGB Secretary; Head of Industrial and Parliamentary Departments; Editor
William PAUL 1884, Glasgow Scottish	Working-class F: storekeeper; traveller	Jeweller; artist; hosiery dealer.	CUG; NSS&WCM	3 No	1920 (d.1958) Editor
David RAMSAY 1883, Dundee	Working-class F: Clerk	Engineer ; Comintern worker.	SDF; CUG; NSS&WCM	2 No	1920 (d.1948)

Scottish					Comintern Cong.del.; Scottish organizer; Supplementary Department
Frederick SILVESTER 1872, Birmingham English	Working-class F: School board officer	Clerk, County Court.	CUG	1 No	1920; left 1922 (d.1934)
Harry WEBB 1892, Ashton, Lancashire English	Working-class F: Iron roller fitter	Cotton mill worker.	CUG	3 Yes	1920 (d.1962) NO; Supplementary Department

Abbreviations: **BBRILU:** British Bureau, Red International of Labour Unions; **CI rep.:** CPGB Representative to Comintern; **CLP:** Communist Labour Party; **Comintern Cong.del:** Comintern Congress delegate; **CP-BSTI:** Communist Party (British Section of the Third International); **CWC:** Clyde Workers' Committee; **CUG:** Communist Unity Group; **DO:** District Organizer; **ECCI:** Executive Committee, Communist International; **ILP:** Independent Labour Party; **ILS:** International Lenin School; **IWCE:** Independent Working Class Education; **IWGB:** Industrial Workers of Great Britain; **MM:** Minority Movement; **NSS&WCM:** National Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee Movement; **SLC:** Scottish Labour College; **SWC:** Scottish Workers' Committee; **SWCC:** South Wales Communist Council; **SWSS:** South Wales Socialist Society; **URC:** Unofficial Reform Committee.

Appendix 2: Former Members of the BSP who served on the CPGB Executive Committee, 1920–1928

Name Date/place of birth Nationality	Social origins	Occupation/	Other pre-CPGB affiliations	ECs 1920- 28 EC post- 1928?	Joined/left CPGB CPGB office
John BIRD 1896, West Calder Scottish	Working-class F: Coal miner	Coal miner; checkweighman.	Fife Miners' Reform Committee	2 No	1920? Left 1930 (d.1964)
John Ross CAMPBELL 1894 Paisley Scottish	Working-class F: Slater	Shop assistant; journalist.	Scottish Workers' Committee; NSS&WCM	5 Yes	1921 (d.1969) BBRILU; Editor; Comintern Cong.del.; ECCI; CI rep.; Scottish industrial organizer; general secretary.
George DEER 1890, Grimsby English	Working-class F: Fisherman	Candlemaker; dock worker; Workers' Union organizer.		1 No	1920; left 1921 → LP (d.1974)
Sam ELSBURY 1880, Russia Russian, British	Working-class F: Tailor's presser	'Tailor and draper on own account'; union official.	SDF/SDP	1 No	1920; expelled 1929 (d.1972) EC member, MM; Comintern Cong.del.
George FLETCHER 1879, Lincolnshire English	Working-class F: Shoemaker	Baker.	SDF/SDP	2 No	1920 (d.1958) Treasurer, MM; Comintern Cong.del.
William GALLACHER 1881, Paisley	Working-class F: Labourer	Brass finisher; munitions worker.	ILP; SDF/SDP; CWC; NSS&WCM; CLP	7 Yes	1921 (d.1965)

Scottish					Vice Chair; Comintern Cong.del.; CI rep.; ECCI; BBRILU; MP, West Fife (1935–1950).
Percy GLADING 1893, London English	Working- class F: Railway labourere	Engineer; gun examiner; office worker.		1 Yes	1920 (d.1970) Colonial Department; Secretary, British League Against Imperialism; ILS
Wal HANNINGTON 1896, London English	Working-class F: Foreman bricklayer	Engineer (toolmaker).	NSS&WCM; NUWCM	5 Yes	1920 (d.1966)
J. F. HODGSON 1866, York English	Working-class F: Tailor's cutter	Foreman cutter, departmental manager, clothing store.	SDF/SDP	4 No	1920; left 1922 (d.1947) Treasurer
Albert INKPIN 1884, London English	Working-class F: Cabinet-maker	Office boy; clerk.	SDF/SDP	10 Yes	1920 (d.1944) Secretary; Friends of the Soviet Union; Secretary, <i>Russia Today</i> Society
Ferdinand L. KERRAN 1883, Tranmere English	Middle-class F: Watch repairer shop	Photography and postcard publishing business.	ILP; SDF/SDP	1 No	1920; 1924 → LP (d.1949) Comintern Cong.del.
William KIRKER 1891, Dumfriesshire Scottish	Working-class F: Plasterer	Coal miner; union official.	Fife Miners' Reform Committee	1 No	1920; left 1925
J. Cecil L'E. MALONE 1890, Beverley English	F: Vicar, Church of England	Naval officer; diplomat.	Liberal Party	1 No	1920; left 1922 → LP (d.1965) MP for East Leyton (1918–1922) (as Communist, 1920–1922)
Dora MONTEFIORE 1851, Surrey English	Middle-class F: Surveyor; entrepreneur	Independent means.	WSPU; SDF	2 No	1920; moved to Australia, 1922; retired from politics in 1929 (d.1933)
Frederick H. PEET 1890, London	Working-class F: Piano maker	Commercial traveller.		1 No	1920; left late 1920s (d.1951)

English					Assistant Secretary; Acting Secretary
Harry POLLITT 1890, Manchester English	Working-class F: Blacksmith's striker	Boilermaker.	ILP; Herald League; WSF; NSS&WCM	6 Yes	1920 (d.1960) BBRILU; Comintern Cong.del.; secretary, MM; general secretary; ECCI
Thomas QUELCH 1886, London English	Middle-class F: Labourer; editor/manager	Compositor; journalist; trade union research officer.	SDF/SDP	3 No	1920; resigned c.1950 (d.1954) Comintern Cong.del; ECCI
Andrew ROTHSTEIN 1898, London British/Russian	Middle-class F: Translator; diplomat	Oxford University; Army 1917–19; Russian Trade Delegation; ROSTA;TASS.		5 Yes	1920 (d.1994)
Frederick SHAW 1890, Huddersfield English	Working-class F: Foreman blacksmith	Engineer.	SLP	1 No	1920; left 1923 → LP (d.1951)
Alfred TOMKINS 1895, London English	Working-class F: Chairmaker	Chairmaker; union official.	NSS&WCM	2 No	1920. Resigned 1929→LP (d.1975)
Joseph J. VAUGHAN 1878, East London English	Working-class F: Woodcarver, chairmaker	Electrician.	Liberal Party; SDF/SDP	1 No	1920 (d.1938) Comintern Cong.del.
Alfred A. WATTS 1861, London English	Working-class F: Coachmaker	Compositor; overseer.	SDF/SDP	2 No	1920 (d.1928)
Frederick WILLIS 1873, London English	Working-class F: Carter	Traveller (woodworking machinery); collector to trade union; editor.	SDF/SDP	1 No	1920 (d.1947) Editor
Harry YOUNG 1901, London English	Working-class F: bicycle shop; removals	Apprentice optician; bookshop assistant; taxi driver; teacher.	Herald League	1 No	1920; resigned 1937; 1940 → SPGB (d.1995)

				National organizer, YCL; YCL rep. in Moscow; English editor, <i>Communist International</i>
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Abbreviations: **BBRILU:** British Bureau, Red International of Labour Unions; **BSP:** British Socialist Party; **CI rep.:** CPGB representative to the Comintern; **CLP:** Communist Labour Party; **Comintern Cong.del.:** Comintern Congress delegate; **CWC:** Clyde Workers' Committee; **ECCI:** Executive Committee, Communist International; **ILP:** Independent Labour Party; **LP:** Labour Party; **MM:** Minority Movement; **NSS&WCM:** National Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee Movement; **NUWCM:** National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement; **ROSTA:** Russian Telegraph Agency; **SDF:** Social Democratic Federation; **SDP:** Social Democratic Party; **SLP:** Socialist Labour Party; **SPGB:** Socialist Party of Great Britain; **TASS:** Russian News Agency; **WPSU:** Women's Political and Social Union; **WSF:** Workers' Socialist Federation; **YCL:** Young Communist League.