

Jim Phillips, Scottish coal miners in the twentieth century

Item Type	Other
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Citation	Gildart, K. (2019) Jim Phillips, Scottish coal miners in the twentieth century, <i>Scottish Labour History</i> , 54 (2019), pp. 86-88.
Publisher	Edinburgh University Press
Journal	Scottish Labour History
Download date	2026-04-16 05:57:30
License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/2436/623392

Jim Phillips, *Scottish Coal Miners in the Twentieth Century*, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, ISBN 978 1 4744 5231 1

This major new work by Jim Phillips on the history of the Scottish miners is a landmark study which deploys a range of methods and sources in producing both a deeply analytical, yet empathetic portrait of an industrial world that has now mostly disappeared in its original form, yet lives on in the collective memory of retired coal miners. The central argument of the book presents a convincing rebuttal of the claims made by some revisionist historians and forms a critical defence of the Scottish miners' commitment to socialism, labour politics and public ownership. Socialism here is understood as 'stable employment, safe workplaces, 'viable communities and economic security'. This was underpinned in the Scottish coalfields by a 'moral economy' personified by the promise of public ownership in 1947 and the creation of the National Coal Board (NCB). The development, fragmentation and destruction of such a 'moral economy' from the 1940s through to the 1980s impacted on collective identities, political organisations, domestic relationships and the micro-cultures of coal communities.

The book is organised in three parts broadly covering the changing nature of ownership and employment; politics and trade union activism; and the defence of 'moral economy' in the Scottish coalfields. Each chapter is rich in analysis and empirical detail bringing to life the communities, characters and dramas of the twentieth century coal industry. The reading of the culture of the NCB is more nuanced than the critiques developed by mining historians of the 1970s and 1980s such as Vic Allen and the plethora of studies that emerged in the aftermath of the 1984/5 strike. The NCB is constructed as 'an important agent in extending economic security'. This goal was shared by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and text brilliantly dissects the personalities and politics of the activists who were fully committed to the goals of nationalisation, planning and the creation of a New Britain in the post-war period. Phillips explores the particular characteristics of what he classifies as 'Village Pits', 'New Mines', and 'Cosmopolitan Collieries'. Each chapter expertly weaves together an analysis of the nature of underground work and the wider culture of coal communities and how they responded to new technology, migration, colliery closures and the seismic political challenges of the 1960s and 1980s. The specific geography and industrial relations cultures of these localities produced particular types of NUM leaders. Using a generational framework the book is rich in the life stories of Scottish miners across the twentieth century such as Abe and Alex Moffatt, Lawrence Daly and Mick McGahey.

A central feature of the 'moral economy' of coal was that 'pit closures and job losses had to be negotiated with union representatives'. In the 1960s closures became a major issue in Scotland and across the British coalfields. Phillips explores a number of case study pits highlighting the ways in which 'moral economy' was being stretched to the limit when communities were being transformed by closures and miners were being uprooted or forced to travel greater distances to get to work. There is some fantastic material in these chapters on how in the 1970s the Scottish NUM began to 'conceptualise deindustrialisation in national terms'. This would become more acute in the period of Thatcherism and the aftermath of the 1984/5 dispute. While attacking the rate of colliery closures miners' leaders also sought to inscribe coal mining and trade unionism into a broader construction of Scottish identity. This was articulated through events such the Miners' Gala and the way in which a shared history of industrial struggle and political education formed a core component of the educational ethos and practice of the Scottish NUM.

The strength of the book is that it challenges some of the assumptions of the dominant literature using a broad range of primary sources, oral history and recently released government papers. Another is the quality of the writing and the author's ability to seamlessly move from what was happening on the coal face, to the union meeting, into the pubs, the street and domestic world of the twentieth century Scottish miner. The final third of the text is dominated by the background and aftermath of the 1984/5 strike. There is much of value here in locating the local roots of the dispute in Scotland. The attack on the 'moral economy' was articulated by the radicalism of the MacGregor leadership of the NCB, but it was built on the macho management of directors such as Albert Wheeler in Scotland. Phillips also unpicks the simplistic equation made by sections of the left and right in contemporary politics suggesting that the de-industrialised working class were prime Brexit voters. In fact, in the former Scottish coalfields there was a significant majority vote in favour of remain.

There are two issues that could be subject to critique. Firstly, there is a tendency throughout the text to suggest that gender identities and male/female relations were transformed by the shifting social mores of the 1960s, the 'moral economy' of the coalfields and the politics of 1984/5. One area that is in need of further research is the continuation of women's oppression, static gender identities, and new forms of misogyny that were sometimes masked in the public sphere yet remained endemic behind closed doors in coal communities. Secondly, for all the problems with the historiography that tends to centre the politics of Scargill in the story of the 1984/5 strike, accounts that try to completely marginalise his role suffer from similar limitations. Scargill was a very different type of NUM leader than not just his predecessor on the right, Joe Gormley, but also others that had a background in the Communist Party. There was a 'cult of leadership' around Scargill that could be witnessed in the mass meetings and devotion shown to his positions particularly by younger miners in both militant and moderate coalfields. This was acknowledged by the Scottish union leaders themselves in the aftermath of the dispute when they formed the main opposition to his leadership in the internal politics of the NUM. Yet these minor criticisms should not deflect from the overall strength of this excellent contribution to the historiography of coal.

The book is a fitting tribute to the thousands of Scottish miners who toiled underground across the twentieth century and played an essential role in building a new society and defending it in the 1980s and 1990s. As an academic text it is a major piece of scholarship that will stand the test of time. However, just as importantly, its empathetic reconstruction of working class culture and politics will ensure that it will be just as warmly received by the general reader with an interest in the history of Scotland.

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