

Digging the Seam

Digging the Seam:
Popular Cultures of the 1984/5 Miners' Strike

Edited by

Simon Pople and Ian W. Macdonald

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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PREFACE

DIGGING THE SEAM, MINING THE MEMORIES, WRITING THE HISTORIES

It is easier to die than to remember
—*Briggflatts*, Basil Bunting

In March 2010, twenty-five years after the end of the 1984-85 miners' strike, a three-day conference, *Digging the Seam: Cultural Reflections and the Consequences of the 1984/5 Miners' Strike*, was held at the University of Leeds to debate and discuss the cultural legacy of the Strike. This book is a record of that conference and of those debates and discussions.

In 1957, the British coal industry employed approximately 700,000 people. By 1970, this figure was 300,000. And by 1984, 196,000 people were employed as miners in the UK. The 1984 strike was called by the National Union of Mineworkers to protect the jobs of those 196,000 people. The strike lasted one year and ended in the defeat of the National Union of Mineworkers. In 2010, only 6,000 people were employed in the Coal Industry in the UK.

Furthermore, the legislation enacted by the Conservative Government of the time, in order to defeat the National Union of Mineworkers, rapidly accelerated the decline in the power of the wider Trade Union movement to protect the jobs and working conditions of its members. And no subsequent government has done anything to reverse that anti-Trade Union legislation. And so the consequences of the defeat of the National Union of Mineworkers are not only memories and histories, they are actual and present for every person living in the UK today.

Trade Unionism means solidarity, a unified body, not isolated, discordant individuals. And any history of the 1984 strike generally then presents the National Union of Mineworkers as against the National Coal Board, and / or against the Government, and / or against the police, and / or the media of the day. One group versus another group, one solid body against another solid body. Or it reduces the strike to single bodies, lone individuals; Arthur Scargill versus Margaret Thatcher and / or Ian

MacGregor. But in each case, “the Strike” is presented as one single “historical event”. One single history, with one single narrative.

But “the Strike” was not one single event with one single narrative that involved, say, the 196,000 people employed by the National Coal Board. It was 196,000 events that involved 196,000 people. And the individual members of their families. And the individual members of their communities. And the individual men who employed them. And the individual union officials who represented them. And the individual police who policed them. And the individual members of the government who governed them. Multiple histories, multiple narratives. Because there was no one single strike, no one single narrative. At the very, very lowest estimate, there are 196,000 narratives of 196,000 histories of 196,000 strikes—196,000 narratives, 196,000 histories, 196,000 strikes—some of love and some of violence, some of hope and some of fear, some of joy and some of sorrow—all endlessly still blowing around us in Benjamin’s “Storm of History”.

But this is **not**—in anyway whatsoever—an attempt to ignore or negate the essential, fundamental collective, communal nature (and possibility!) of industrial action. Rather it is to acknowledge and address the difficulty—(the impossibility!)—of then “representing” those 196,000 narratives, those 196,000 histories, in a “work of art”; a book—be it fiction or fact—prose or poetry, drama or film, painting or sculpture, music and lyric. In short, the problems of any representation of any history.

But the 1984-85 miners’ strike created / inspired / spawned, and continues to create / inspire / spawn, many and varied representations of its many and varied narratives. Few, if any, of the artists—writers, filmmakers, painters and musicians—whose works were discussed at the conference and in the pages of this book would ever be arrogant or foolish enough to lay claim to be “telling or showing” the “whole story”.

But still, the inherent subjective individual nature of all the artistic responses to the strike give rise to questions of authenticity and appropriation; who should remember, what should they remember, when should they remember and how should they remember the strike? And to questions of accuracy and representation; who should represent, what should they represent, when should they represent and how should they represent the strike? Questions, in essence, of “ownership” and “theft”.

So faced with 196,000 narratives, 196,000 histories, with fears of inaccuracy and misrepresentation, worries of in-authenticity and mis-appropriation, and accusations of theft, what should the artist do? Should the artist just walk away? Close the door? The curtains? Go back to bed? To sweeter dreams of better worlds? Worlds that never were nor ever will

be? Should the artist resign from any engagement with “lived history”, with the “real world”? Should the artist abdicate from any notion of obligation, from any sense of responsibility?

No.

It is the obligation of the artist to try—to try and to try, again and again—to remember these 196,000 narratives, these 196,000 histories and the responsibility of the artist to then represent these 196,000 narratives, these 196,000 histories, so that people—people now, people later—never, ever forget these 196,000 narratives, these 196,000 histories. The obligation and the responsibility, the challenge and the dream.

And, of course, more-often-than-not, the artist will fail.

Because, of course, some people will say, The 1984-85 miners’ strike wasn’t “like” this book / film / painting / song. And other people will say, Yes, it was / No, it wasn’t / Yes, it was / No, it wasn’t / Yes, it was etc, etc, etc.

Well, at least the artist tried—

Tried to remember the strike, struggled to represent the strike; the sacrifices and the suffering, the solidarity and the struggle, the hope and the fear, the defeat and its consequences, its legacy and its spectres. Not out of arrogance, not out of vanity. Out of obligation, out of responsibility—

To those who truly struggled from March 1984 to March 1985, and who struggled before, and who struggle still ...

So their struggle will be remembered, so their struggle will be represented. So their struggle can still educate, so their struggle can still inspire.

And that is what this book is about. The attempts and the struggles to represent the 1984 / 85 miners’ strike and its legacy.

David Peace, May 2011

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We particularly want to thank all the contributors for their time, patience and commitment and everyone who attended and participated in the conference.

Simon would like to add particular thanks to Judith and Marcus whilst Ian would also like to thank Nicola, Lydia and Polly Macdonald for their support.

INTRODUCTION

A dance to the tune of economic decline
Is when you do the bottom line
Nagging questions always remain
Why did it happen and who was to blame?
—Mick Jones (*Big Audio Dynamite*), “The Bottom Line”, 1985

The idea for this book, and the conference that preceded it was the rapidly approaching 25th anniversary of the strike and the culmination of two BBC/AHRC funded projects we were running that had been looking at archival news reports of the dispute. The people that we had been working with on this project were framed in this archival record – frozen in a cultural moment. Their experiences, stories and histories were contained in several hundred hours of footage held by the BBC and largely unseen or unquestioned since their original transmission during the long year of the strike. Watching this material in preparation for the research we were about to undertake led us to think more and more about the role of popular culture in relation to the strike and the communities it had so dramatically affected. Our own memories of that year were strong—one of us coming from a mining family and having both been politically active as a consequence of it. The occasional song, documentary or novel, such as David Peace’s *GB84* (2004) certainly triggered brief remembrances, but it was in the sustained reliving of the strike through these news reports- with an expansive and sustained narrative arc—that we were drawn more forcibly into considering the vital role played by culture in preserving a set of crucial national histories. The material evoked memories that had perhaps begun to fade and awakened a renewed interest in the social and cultural dimension of the strike and the cultural legacy it had produced. The social and political consequences of this dispute, which have resonated for the past quarter century, have been subject to detailed analysis and reflection. The consequences for the arts and popular culture were less clearly mapped.

In viewing and discussing some of the BBC films with original participants from both sides in the strike we were struck by the depth of feeling, the unlocking of memory and the sense of both exhilaration and despair it evoked. The original Open Archive project had begun as a means to explore a certain type of cultural memory, one that was housed

within an institutional collection and in many respects as remote as it could be from the people it framed. We worked with groups on both sides of the strike, looking at their responses to a short film we had made that told the story of the strike through national and regional news items and through focus groups and interviews began to formulate advice for the BBC about how they could best allow public access to these materials, how those represented could find their own voice and use the materials to build or rebuild histories of their own communities and take some form of cultural ownership of often contentious and contested representations.

What developed out of this was a second project, again jointly funded by the BBC and the AHRC that wanted to allow some of the original participants, miners, activists and police officers—to produce a response to the archive, to provide context and to challenge the orthodoxy of the original representations of themselves and their communities that were in danger of becoming a fixed interpretation. We explored several potential means of delivering this but the group decided that they wanted to produce their own cultural intervention through filmmaking. The creative approach that they took through their own films, collectively titled *Strike Stories* (2010), demonstrated the power of film as a means of historical and cultural interpretation. This experience raised a number of questions about the role of culture for us that we increasingly wanted to explore in dialogue with participants, activists, artists and academics. We saw the *Digging the Seam* conference as a means of drawing together a range of people from entirely different backgrounds who had all to some extent experienced, participated in or represented the strike and the communities it had affected.

The subsequent conference, which forms the basis of this book, took place at Leeds University in March 2010, marking the 25th anniversary of the end of the year-long strike. This anniversary seemed to provide a perfect opportunity to reflect on the legacy of the dispute and to explore the role of culture and the cultural industries within this important context. The conference approached these issues through two main strands. It firstly examined cultural representations of the strike and broader mining culture through popular forms such as literature, music, dance, theatre, performance, photography, television and cinema. It considered how popular culture had recorded and represented the strike and its associated cultures in the intervening 25 years as well as its role in the preservation of particular traditions, memories and practices in a new “post industrial” society. Secondly it reflected on the relationships between the strike and cultural production. It considered how cultural producers in forms such as music, painting, photography, theatre and cinema responded and contributed

to the strike and how cultural producers have actively (re)constructed meanings of the strike in the intervening years. Arguably, the defeat of the miners hastened the onset of various forms of policy, aimed at regenerating “post-industrial” communities through information and cultural industries and this was also a key consideration, especially in respect to the growing debates about cultural ownership, heritage and memorialisation. The selection of papers that appear in this book represent a small cross section of the presentations that formed the conference that covered an incredibly rich field of approach that included: cultural and industrial identity, political theatre, folk traditions, popular music and the strike, documentary film and photography, storytelling and testimony, the cultural industries, digital resources and the strike, archives and the reconstruction of cultural memory, painting, arts activism, the political novel, poetry and protest and culture as memory. In selecting material for inclusion we wanted to ensure that we captured the full range and spirit of the presentations that took place over the three days of the conference. Much of what we experienced was in the form of exhibition, screening and discussion and cannot be captured but these included contributions from the musician Russell Senior of *Pulp*, filmmakers Eve Wood *The Beat is the Law* (2010) and Dominique Masson *The Last Strike* (1985), photographic exhibitions by Martin Shakeshaft, Ken Wilkinson and Paul Davis, artwork by Jo Pearson, special exhibitions by the cartoonist Steve Bell and the National Cartoon Archive, and screenings organised by the British Film Institute. As a means of organising the texts that we finally selected we have expanded the initial two themes of the conference into four sections, each with a brief introduction that map the interrelatedness between cultural representation, cultural intervention and historical memory.

The first deals with the idea of mining culture and pre-strike representations in popular sentiment, film and literature of the nature of mining life, character and the political struggles that have historically framed the profession. The second examines the role cultural forms played directly in the context of the strike, as a means of political commentary, activism and fund raising. The third looks at subsequent cultural renderings or reconstructions of the strike and the final section looks at the current process of memorialisation and commemoration.

Associated with the conference were two events staged by Opera North and the University of Leeds as part of the Dare partnership at the Howard Assembly rooms. The first a screening and discussion of Yvette Vanson’s powerful film about the events at Orgreave, *The Battle for Orgreave* (1985) with her husband Michael Mansfield QC who had defended and seen acquitted all those accused of riot during that confrontation. The

second was a specially commissioned song cycle *Songs at the Year's End* with a score by composer Hugh Nankivell and a libretto by poet Ian McMillan. Ian's account of the work and a section of the libretto concludes this book and acts as a testimony to the emotional resonances culture can transmit and celebrate. It was an emotional and euphoric performance in a packed theatre and ended what was an exhilarating, emotional and profoundly affirming experience.

—Simon Pople

For me the abiding impression of the miners' strike is one of emotion—not my own emotion, necessarily, but that of others. On New Year's Eve 1984, I sat with striking miners and their families in their Welfare Club at Betteshanger, Kent, and felt—at one step removed—their pride, hope, fear, anger, hurt, love for their families and despair at what their elected leaders were doing to them and their industry. They felt betrayed by the media they had once admired, despite their willingness to let a Thames TV crew document their struggle. They were not bitter even though what they saw on TV and read in newspapers bore little relationship to what they knew from the inside. They knew the mainstream media's framework was not theirs, that what was important to them was thought of as partisan, one-sided, by the liberal press.

Only more recently, as John Corner points out, have the social sciences and humanities focused on subjectivity as “something of a ‘black box’ for many different kinds of enquiry” (2011:86). The binary division between fact and fiction, history and story, truth and lies, proof and that which is true to the spirit, is the same division between objectivity and subjectivity—that which can be seen and that which is unseen, yet which is nevertheless there. If the “zone of interiority” to which Corner refers is awkward to explore, that sense of “who people think they are” is surely still more important in understanding their motivations for their subsequent actions, than a passionless “chessboard” view of history, where actions are explained by simple (and often large) forces acting upon other forces. A sense of habitus, of identity, respect and self-respect, class, gender and ethnicity are given life within a particular individual, and expression through emotions like fear and love. We need to acknowledge what people say about what they feel.

In a sense the clash between the media and the miners was between two ways of storytelling; the mainstream media seeking the dramatic struggle but formulating it as rational action, or irrational behaviour. The

1980s was the time of the “alternative” media, and the other way of telling stories got the “alternative” press, where the miners found their voices in *The Miners Campaign Tapes*, where the poetry of the miners’ wives burst forth, where the politics of the moment joined up with the camaraderie of the picket line. The prominence given to emotion in these forms of cultural expression sat badly in the mainstream media of the 1980s, where the presentation rewarded measured rationality and a friendly, if concerned, face.

It is not enough for us, as historians, to rely only on factual accounts, political and economic analyses, surviving archive material and reviews of whether mistakes were made by the editors of the day. We have to take account of what this meant and means to those involved, at that time and now, in relation to their lives and identities. This is not nostalgia, nor even sympathy, but understanding.

Hence the driving force behind Simon’s two research projects for the BBC and AHRC, the 2010 conference at the University of Leeds, and this book. As Simon says, the conference was surprisingly moving; to see the British premiere of Dominique Masson’s extraordinary film of Lancashire miners *The Last Strike*, 25 years after it was made, was both instructive and very poignant. To hear a member of the audience at the performance of *Songs at the Year’s End* barely able to thank Ian McMillan through his tears was to share a moment, not of nostalgia, but of sheer raw emotion. This book attempts to dig into the lasting impact of this huge and traumatic event, not by explaining its detail, but by understanding its effect on people.

—Ian W. Macdonald

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SECTION ONE:
MINING CULTURES

INTRODUCTION

SIMON POPPLE

The representation of the miner and mining life has been a particular feature of popular culture since the nineteenth century. The folk roots of mining's indigenous culture reach back much further but the explosion in literary, lantern, filmic and photographic forms has ensured a continual focus on the industry and has resulted in the construction of a series of representational frames that both eulogise and demonise. The basis of these frames draws on an emergent strategy of both viewing mining as a dangerous and heroic profession whilst simultaneously seeing dangers in the development of labour identity, trade unionism and in the perception of militancy.

The bold heroic miner, the backbone of British industrial might is perhaps the most dominant early cultural rendering and lantern slides sets such as Bamforth's popular realisation of the song "Don't go down the mine, Dad" (1910) which expresses the dangers and sacrifice that attend the profession.¹ In the accompanying song a child dreams of a pit disaster and on waking implores his father not to work, his father finally heeds the advice and avoids the fate that befalls his comrades.

The miner, a man with a heart good and kind,
Stood by the side of his son;
He said, "It's my living, I can't stay away,
For duty, my lad, must be done."
The little one look'd up, and sadly he said,
"Oh, please stay today with me, Dad!"
But as the brave miner went forth, to his work,
He heard this appeal from his lad:

CHORUS: "Don't go down in the mine, Dad,
Dreams very often come true;
Daddy, you know it would break my heart
If anything happened to you;
Just go and tell my dream to your mates,
And as true as the stars that shine,
Something is going to happen today,
Dear Daddy, don't go down the mine!"

(Donnelly 1910)

Similarly one of the first British documentaries, the Sheffield based Kinetograph Films' *Day in the Life of a Coalminer* (1910) depicts the arduous nature of life in the Wigan coalfields which includes shots of child workers and women picking coal and working in the stockyards. This dangerous environment is contrasted with the closing domestic shots of coal being used to heat an affluent household in which a servant lays the fire. The contrast and the debt are forcibly stated.

This typing of mining life was also often contrasted with concerns about the consequences of the reliance on coal and on the political leverage that miners increasingly exercised in the pursuit of safer worker conditions, better wages and in the drive towards nationalisation. The growing Union power and solidarity of the workforce was often seen popularly as a threat to stability in a period of domestic crisis and marks the cultural divide between the figure of the "Brave Miner" and Margaret Thatcher's "Enemy Within".

The three chapters in this first section clearly reflect the different ways in which these framings have been articulated through specific forms and how, through official cultural channels, they often seek to balance oppositional traditions.

Notes

¹ The slides can be seen here:
<http://www.slides.uni-trier.de/set/index.php?id=3003305>

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CHAPTER ONE

“ALIVE TO PRODUCTION, MISERY, SLAVERY— DEAD TO ENJOYMENT AND HAPPINESS”: HUMANISING (IN)ACTIVITY IN 1842 AND 1984/5

MIKE SANDERS

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of a danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. (Benjamin 1992:247)

The danger threatening the 1984-85 miners’ strike is not that of being forgotten, of being consigned to historical oblivion, but rather that of being only available to the memory in ways which separate its historical significance from its current relevance. As the commemorative activity surrounding the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of the strike attests, the events of 1984-85 are not in imminent danger of falling prey to historical amnesia. Indeed, it might even be argued that as the trauma of the events themselves has receded in the national consciousness (if not for many of the individuals most directly involved), so it has become easier to speak of what happened in 1984-85. Moreover, through films such as *Brassed Off* (1996) and *Billy Elliot* (2000), and novels such as Martyn Waites’ *Born Under Punches* (2003), David Peace’s *GB84* (2004) and Val McDermid’s *A Darker Domain* (2008), both the strike and its aftermath are being rearticulated as a form of cultural memory. This cultural memorialisation

of the miners' strike assumes an even greater significance when we consider that one of the longer term consequences of the strike has been the effective destruction of many mining communities and the marginalization of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Both the communal and institutional structures which, through oral tradition and sponsored history alike, would have preserved those "stories from below" as a vital component of working-class history have been, at best, severely weakened. It is precisely because the events of 1984-85 are unlikely to be forgotten in the foreseeable future, that their narrative framing, and thus the way in which those events are understood, will constitute the crucial ideological afterlife of the miners' strike.

From the outset it must be noted that there exist many narratives of the miners' strike. These range from individual accounts, such as Ken Ambler's *A Coalfield in Chaos* (1989) and Norma Dolby's *Norma Dolby's Diary: An Account of the Great Miners' Strike* (1987), through stories of particular areas and regions such as Peter Gibbon's *Thurcroft Village and the Miners' Strike: An Oral History* (1986) and Gill Newton's *We Are Women, We Are Strong: Stories of Northumberland Miners' Wives 1984-5* (1986), to attempts to offer a national perspective, such as Francis Beckett's and David Hencke's *Marching to the Fault Line* (2009). In spite of differences of focus and interpretation, many of these narratives share one common feature—an insistence on the historical significance of the strike. The opening sentence of *Marching to the Fault Line*—"The story of the 1984-5 miners' strike starts in 1926" (Beckett & Hencke, 2009, 1)—exemplifies the tendency to pair "1984/85" with the General Strike of 1926. This pairing has consequences for our understanding of the 1984-5 miners' strike, because the presence of "1926" provides a range of narrative tropes (from both "left" and "right") which place constraints on the telling of 1984/85. For the "left", the narrative is dominated by tropes of betrayal and prematurity, while the "right" prefers to speak of demagoguery and self-defeating extremism. Yet in spite of differences of tone and perspective these narratives share an underlying unity. Ultimately, these are all tales of incapacity, of the inability of the working-class to enact a radical transformation of the capitalist order.

Clearly, the brute fact of historical defeat which belongs to such moments is easily transformed into the ideological assertion of the impossibility of there ever being such a victory. For socialist critics and historians alike, the necessity of contesting such historical pessimism is self-evident. However, the signifier "1984/85" is threatened by an even more insidious danger wherein it is transformed into a signifier of "historicity" rather than "history". In this version, the courage, endurance

and heroism exhibited by mining communities throughout the strike, even the justice of the miners' cause, can be openly acknowledged because the present moment is insulated from these forces by the hermetic seal of historicism which proclaims

such things did indeed happen then, but the world has changed so much since that such things could never happen again.

Thus the 1984/85 miners' strike becomes the last battle of the "old" industrial capitalist order and, therefore, retains a purely antiquarian significance in a post-industrial world.

The historicist or antiquarian narrative defuses the political content of the strike far more effectively than its historical counterpart. It also creates the conditions under which the strike can be consigned to historical oblivion even as it is being remembered. For as Benjamin reminds us in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History",

every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.
(Benjamin 1992:247)

According to Benjamin, the task of the Marxist critic becomes that of fanning "the spark of hope in the past", of "seiz[ing] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" and, by a process of constellating past events with the present emergency, finding ways of reactivating in present struggles the revolutionary energies generated by past defeats (Benjamin 1992:247). In short, Benjamin proposes a politics of remembrance which is neither nostalgic nor defeatist.

Thus, in a Benjaminian spirit, I want to constellate the 1984/85 strike with the Chartist mass strike of 1842 and an 1832 pamphlet by William Benbow entitled *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes*. In so doing I want to situate the 1984/85 strike not just within the history of coal-mining in the UK, nor only as a momentous event in the history of British industrial capitalism (for in either of these versions it is effectively lost to the present historical moment), but to restore it to the metanarrative of class struggle. My aim is to trace the deep-seated historical impulses towards economic and political freedom within the working classes and to show how these drives—the political unconscious of socialism as it were—achieve visibility and articulacy in, and through, the moment of the mass strike.

In his pamphlet, Benbow comments on the inverse relationship between productivity and consumption which was becoming such a marked feature of the nascent industrial capitalist order. Using a dialectical

formulation (which seems, impossibly, to echo Hegel and anticipate Marx), Benbow identifies the paradoxical aspect of alienated labour:

For many years the people have done nothing for themselves. They have not even existed, for they have not enjoyed life. Their existence has been enjoyed by others; they have been, as far as regards themselves, non-entities. They have had neither ease, gaiety, nor pleasure; they have not lived; for a state of continual toil, privation and sickness can never be called life...The existence of the working man is a negative. He is alive to production, misery, and slavery—dead to enjoyment and happiness. He produces and is miserable: others enjoy and are happy.
(Benbow 1832:4-5)

When Benbow turns his attention to the question of how this state of affairs has arisen, he offers the standard radical explanation by identifying “priestcraft” and “kingcraft” as the twin causes of political oppression and economic exploitation.

To remedy this condition, Benbow calls for “UNITY OF THOUGHT AND ACTION” on the part of the people. More specifically, he recommends resistance to the current political order:

When the people fight their own battle—when they are active in resistance to the greater part of existing institutions...when they are convinced of their own power and worth, they will then enjoy the advantages a people ought to enjoy. They will be everything they were not before; they will be no longer abused, maltreated, and lessened in their own estimation. They will be no longer robbed of the fruits of their toil: no longer oppressed and goaded to despair, their lives will no longer be a burden too heavy to be borne.
(Benbow 1832:5)

Here Benbow identifies political activity in quasi-Hegelian terms as the negation of the negation. It is by resisting the current political order that the people will actively constitute themselves as a people.

The particular plan of action recommended by Benbow is that of a general cessation of labour, a mass or general strike, or to use Benbow’s own term a “Grand National Holiday”. The Grand National Holiday is not envisaged as a spontaneous response to economic distress; rather it must be prepared for with the utmost care and thoroughness. Benbow calls for the formation of “Committees of management of the working classes...in every city, town, village and parish” (Benbow 1832:11). These committees must agitate and educate in advance of the Grand National Holiday and ensure that every man lays in sufficient stores for the first week of the strike. During that first week the people will examine the public funds in

their localities and decide on how they are to be used; in effect, an expropriation of the poor-rates and the church-rates. The next step, Benbow advises, will be to levy a voluntary loan in support of the sovereignty of the people and to expropriate the landed estates to secure food supplies. Benbow invites the reader to imagine the pleasure with which those self-proclaimed “friends of the people” will contribute to the people’s cause:

Mr Coke’s heart will beat for joy when he finds such an occasion for his liberality, as we are going to give him. We see him already ringing for his check-book, and ordering droves of oxen, and waggon-loads of his wheat to be sent to us holiday folks.
(Benbow 1832:15)

Thereafter, the localities will select delegates to the National Congress, which body will be charged with reforming the entire social order. In particular, by requiring work from all, society will be restored to a healthy balance—“work will become so light, that it will not be considered work, but wholesome exercise” (Benbow 1832:13).

It is worth discussing Benbow’s pamphlet in some detail because it offers a remarkably concentrated summary of the dialectical nature of the mass strike. Benbow anticipates one of the key insights of the Marx of the Paris Manuscripts, with his recognition that the very labour which constitutes our “species-being” is experienced by the worker as a dehumanising activity—it renders the worker’s life a “negative” in Benbow’s formulation. Thus, paradoxically, the cessation of labour in the form of the mass strike provides the means by which an authentically “human” society might be realised. The mass strike, therefore, becomes the negation of the negation. In addition, for Benbow, the aims of the mass strike are understood as fundamentally political. Although strike action is in its very nature economic, the passage from the economic to the political is almost instantaneous here.

It is worth observing at this juncture that at a comparatively early stage of its historical development, bourgeois ideology insists on the absolute separation of the “economic” from the “political”. It does this to invest the economic with the aura of “naturalness” and inevitability, whilst at the same time designating the political as the realm wherein the “necessary” social adjustments to this supposed force of nature will be made. The longevity of this ideological necessity can be gauged by the speed with which the current global banking crisis has been remodelled as one of public sector expenditure. By contrast, Benbow insists on making the economic subordinate to the political.

Furthermore, Benbow regards the mass strike as a creative act. Precisely because it will, in his words, “renovate” the people, it will need to produce the organisational forms which will enable a renovated people to appear. Finally, there is more than a hint of the carnivalesque in Benbow’s account of the people’s representatives descending upon the aristocratic houses in order to hold their congress and claim the necessary means of sustenance.¹ Once more, this overturning is seen as a form of “righting”, of correcting the imbalances and perversions of the old order. All of these features—the strike as an assertion of human value (understood as economic and political freedom), the necessity of subordinating the economic to the political, strike action as both collective creativity and a mode of the carnivalesque—are important aspects of the 1984/85 strike.

Benbow’s “Grand National Holiday” remained an important current throughout the Owenite and Chartist periods.² Indeed, we might see the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union as an attempt to develop an organisational form capable of carrying out Benbow’s plan. Similarly, following the rejection of the first petition, the Chartist movement did make a half-hearted attempt to organise a “sacred month” or general cessation of labour, but without conducting any of the preparatory work envisaged by Benbow, and the attempt collapsed very quickly. However, in 1842, something akin to a mass strike arose spontaneously.

Speaking at the trial of many of the strike’s leaders in 1843, Sir Frederick Pollock (the Attorney-General), traced the origins of the mass strike of 1842 to a meeting of masters and men held in Stalybridge on Friday August 5th during which “something was said that gave offence to the men” (O’Connor 1970:4). That “something” was, in actuality, a proposal to reduce wages by 25% and two days later, a mass meeting on Mottram Moor (equidistant from the textile townships of Stalybridge, Ashton-under-Lyne and Hyde) called for a strike in response to the threatened wage cuts. From this centre the strike spread within days to Oldham and then to Manchester. The strike wave extended its reach occupationally as well as geographically and by August 15th some 250,000 workers in the cotton and coal industries were on strike. On August 16th (a symbolically charged date for the nineteenth-century Labour movement as the anniversary of the “Peterloo” massacre), the strike’s leadership voted to maintain and extend the strike until the People’s Charter should become the law of the land. In a reciprocal move, the National Executive of the National Charter Association (also meeting in Manchester) declared its support for the strike. The main historian of the strike, Mick Jenkins, claims that at its peak it

involved up to half-a-million workers and covered an area which stretched from Dundee and the Scottish coalfields to South Wales and Cornwall. (Jenkins 1980:21)

There were serious disturbances in the Potteries, and as troops poured into the manufacturing districts to restore “order”, the military opened fire on strikers at Preston, Blackburn, Skipton, Halifax and Burslem. Although the Chartist leadership had declared itself in favour of the strike, it was divided on the question of how much practical support should be given by the Chartist movement. Ultimately their dilemma was resolved by the government, who arrested almost the entirety of the Chartist and strike leaderships alike. Thereafter the strike lost momentum and by the end of September 1842 the strike was effectively over without having been decisively “broken”.

Many aspects of the 1842 mass strike would be recognisable to veterans of the 1984/85 miners’ strike. These include the “determined spontaneity” of its origins (in 1842 as in 1984/85 both sides were anticipating a conflict), the constant interchange between “economic” and “political” demands, the ambiguous nature of the support extended by the political leaders of the wider working-class movement (and the recriminations which ensued in the strikes’ aftermaths), through to the often brutal role played by the repressive state apparatus.

By constellating 1984/85 with 1842 and Benbow’s pamphlet it is possible to trace the deep-seated historical continuities which persist across a century and a half of working-class practice and theory. All three depend on the notion of “livelihood”, an assertion of fundamental human worth which cannot be measured in narrow “economic” terms. From this initial commitment to a defence of livelihood comes the necessity of resistance, the necessary passage from the economic to the political, the eruption of the carnivalesque as socially-determined roles are placed in abeyance, and the concomitant flowering of working-class creativity (which manifests itself at both the level of the organized collective and that of the individual). The final section of this chapter will substantiate these claims using (in the main) the remarkable archives of (largely unpublished) poems of miners’ and miners wives’ uncovered by Dr Katy Shaw. This material will be augmented by Raymond Williams’ important essay, “Mining the Meaning: Key Words in the Miners’ Strike”.

In his essay (first published in *New Socialist* in March 1985) Williams challenged the emerging Thatcherite orthodoxy which defined the 1984/85 strike as the last instance of an outmoded militancy. He writes:

The miners' strike is being represented as the last kick of an old order.
 Properly understood, it is one of the first steps towards a new order.
 (Williams 1989:123)

More specifically, Williams sees the strike as a clash of two rival emergent cultures. On the one hand he identifies “a new nomad capitalism, which exploits actual places and people and then (as it suits it) moves on” (Williams 1989:125). That we now know this nomad capitalism by the name of globalization in no way diminishes the acuteness of Williams' analysis of its essential nature. In opposition to this nomad capitalism, the miners posited an economy organized around the need of a community to sustain itself. As Williams himself recognized, this not only “requires a big shift” in terms of dominant forms of economic thinking, but its very refusal “to separate economics from a people and a society” has clear political implications (ibid.). That these complex economic and political analyses were being generated and discussed within mining communities is demonstrated by the poem “Prophet” by Anne Suddick.

The elusive pursuit of profitability
 In real terms means a hopelessness for the workers
 It is they who suffer the cutbacks
 In overtime—in mealtimes—in jobs.

The elusive pursuit of profitability
 In real terms means the mobility of a lost generation
 The victims of monetarism
 No hope—no future—no jobs.

The elusive pursuit of profitability
 In real terms heralds a new kind of terrorism
 An objective destruction
 Of dignity—of humanity— and jobs.

The elusive pursuit of profitability
 In real terms will create a unity of the victims of oppression
 To fight the inequality
 By socialism, humanity and dignity
 And they will win.³

This poem begins by redefining the economic abstraction “profitability” in terms of its real world consequences, “the cutbacks/In overtime—in mealtimes—in jobs”. It pursues this theme through the next two stanzas, insisting (in a way which Benbow would have recognized) that the emphasis on profitability renders workers' lives as simple “negatives”.

However, in her final stanza Suddick also posits the possibility of the negation of the negation and ends her poem on a note of defiant optimism, asserting that finally “the victims of oppression [note the shift from the economic to the political]... will win”.

The resistance to which Suddick alludes, and which was amply demonstrated by mining communities for the duration of the strike, also occasioned remarkable demonstrations of working-class creativity. In part this creativity, especially at the level of collective organization, was borne out of necessity. The early sequestration of the NUM’s finances, for example, prompted the rapid evolution of local support and solidarity groups, whilst the need to feed entire families was met by the provision of collective kitchens. In both cases, the activities of the miners and their supporters created, albeit temporarily, organizational structures which prefigured the forms of socialist society implied by their economic and political analysis. It is precisely this aspect of the strike which leads Williams to describe it as constituting the “first steps towards a new order”.

Creativity was also manifested at an individual level in the tremendous outpouring of poetry produced during the strike. In a remarkable instance of historical continuity, in the same way that literally hundreds of Chartist activists produced poetry in pursuit of their political aims, so did their spiritual and, no doubt in some cases, literal heirs in the 1984/85 strike. Poetry and politics are linked by their transformative potential and this is illustrated by the last poem I want to consider – “Kim” by Jean Gittins.

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

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

We could have gone on, for the rest of our lives
 Never knowing, just what she was like
 And she'd have been trapped in our image of her
 If it hadn't been for the strike.
 (Gittins 1985:24)

This poem serves to remind us that another of the great transformations wrought by the 1984/85 strike was the restructuring of gender roles and