

Conclusion

The coal industry has a central place in the economic, political and industrial relations history of modern Britain. No industry compares with its fundamental role in providing so much employment, generating as much economic activity and giving rise to trade unions and a powerful Labour Party that were to play such significant roles in British politics and the evolution of the British state. Another important characteristic of the coal industry now needs to be recognised: it is clearly crucial to the modern history of disability in Britain. No other industry posed the same variety or severity of risks to its workers or generated as large a number of disabled individuals on a daily basis. No other industry was required to organise itself to quite the same degree to respond to the lives and fates of people impaired in its ordinary functions. No other industry left such a legacy of ill-health, impairment and chronic sickness during the twentieth century. Former coalfield communities across Britain continue to suffer the legacy of nineteenth- and twentieth-century coal capitalism and continue to face high levels of impairment and disability in their post-industrial situation.¹

That the coal industry impaired such large numbers of people was evident to miners, doctors, journalists, writers, social surveyors, government inspectors and commissioners, even employers at times. The large-scale disasters that took hundreds of lives at a time received most of the attention and pricked the conscience of the broader public, but it was also evident to anyone who looked that impairment and disability were common features of mining communities. For even the most casual observer of any coalmining community, the results of industrial impairment were immediately obvious. Whether it was to the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent in the 1850s, to the socialist missionaries in the 1890s or to a Polish sociologist in the 1940s, the ubiquity of disability in mining communities was immediately obvious, and an evident shock to such individuals who visited mining communities for the first time.² The inhabitants of mining communities, of course, considered it a normal aspect of everyday life and, apart from writers who looked to portray or communicate something of the reality of life in such places for an outside audience, were much less likely to comment upon it in quite the same ways.

This did not mean that disability as a result of industrial accident or chronic disease was simply passively accepted by coalfields workers. For the people of mining communities, the toll of impairment, disease and disability gave rise to new forms of organisation and to a particular political activism, both of which placed disability at their core and attempted to assist the victims of coal

exploitation. Friendly societies, workers' medical schemes, disablement funds, provident societies, artificial limb funds, blind charities, permanent provident funds, convalescent institutions, truss schemes and other such organisations were numerous in mining communities and touched the lives of a significant proportion of the population. Alongside such schemes, miners' trade unions placed impairment at the heart of their industrial relations activities and, unlike sleeping car porter brotherhoods in America, never wavered from their belief that impairment was caused by dangerous working conditions and uncaring employers, rather than by worker carelessness.³ If, as one historian has claimed, the South Wales Miners' Federation devoted as much of its time and resources to compensation matters as it did to wages and working conditions, then it is clear that disability was one of the core concerns of miners' unions.⁴ In fact, injury and occupational disease were central components of a critique of coal capitalism that lay at the heart of trade union organisation from the mid-Victorian period through to the mid-twentieth century. They also stood right at the heart of the campaign to end private ownership in the industry and to replace it with nationalisation during the three or four decades prior to 1947.⁵ In each case, some of the political rhetoric drew upon tropes of pity as well as fraternity and justice, and had negative consequences for the perceptions of disabled people and understandings of disability. More generally, the labour movement in British coalfields attempted to undermine the idea of disability as a matter of individual morality and reframe it as a matter of political economy.⁶

This politicisation of disability is one of the distinctive features of coalfields literature in the same period. At the level of structure as well as content, this politico-ethical trope is central to the emergence of both a new industrial realism and coalfields modernism. While disability, following well-established literary and cultural conventions, could be used as a *synecdoche* for immorality or a plot device to deliver religious redemption, in the hands of miner-writers disability was a powerful metaphor for the marginalised working class and a litmus test for the solidarity and mutualism espoused by socialist principles. Rather than being primarily a marker of the abnormal against which 'normalcy' could be defined, disability is presented as both symptom of the deprivations and demands of industry *and* a feature of the daily lived experiences of a mutually supportive community.

Apart from the centrality of disability to daily life and the politics of coalmining communities, it is also evident that the coal industry was crucial in the employment of disabled people. This fact goes right to the heart of one of the major shibboleths of disability studies. According to certain seminal works in disability studies in the 1970s and 1980s, the commodification of labour brought about by industrialisation served to disable and oppress people with bodily impairments

through the denial of productive work in the economy and their isolation in the home or in institutions.⁷ The situation in the coal industry, however, was far more complex than any such sociological model would recognise. This was partly a product of the nature of the coal industry, since it offered a range of different jobs and tasks to be completed by workers, some of which were suitable for workers with quite severe impairments, such as work in the lamp-room at the pithead. The coal industry thus employed a type of disabled worker quite different from those being trained for low-paid manual labour at workhouses and segregated special education institutions: one that remained integrated in coalfield communities.⁸ Periods of labour shortage, such as during the two world wars, also worked to increase the possibilities for employment as impaired former miners were reabsorbed into the workforce.

The employment of impaired miners was also a product of a moral economy within the industry in which employers, to a greater or lesser degree, recognised that they had a responsibility to old and infirm miners who had lost their strength and health in their employ. Certainly, this moral economy came under pressure from the workings of the compensation system that discouraged the employment of impaired workers, who now came to be seen as a 'bad risk', but it did survive throughout these decades and into the period of nationalisation under the NCB. Most importantly of all, the employment of disabled workers was enshrined in the compensation system enacted in 1897, since the category of 'partially disabled', requiring 'partial compensation', placed an expectation for disabled miners to be provided with 'light employment' if the employer wished to avoid the cost of 'full compensation'. This was not an absolute right, of course, and employers used various tactics or loopholes in the legislation to avoid this requirement, or else varied in their estimations of the costs of different responses to 'partially disabled' miners. Nevertheless, the statutory compensation system did help to ensure that large numbers of impaired miners continued to be employed in the industry right through the first half of the twentieth century.

The extent to which the coal industry was disabling, therefore, is extremely complex. Each impaired miner found himself in a unique position as far as his bodily capacity, the attitude of his employer and the possibility of moving to other jobs in the pit were concerned. Given the existence of piece rates at the coalface or different grades of pay for various groups of underground and surface workers, and the varied levels of status attached to these, all impaired miners were disabled to a greater or lesser degree, as impairment affected their ability to work and to earn a livelihood. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that all men impaired by their work in the coal industry suffered social isolation or economic marginalisation, even if this was the experience of a significant proportion of them. This is especially the case for the types of

chronic and progressive conditions associated with old age and infirmity, on the one hand, and occupational disease such as pneumoconiosis, on the other. In such instances, the extent of impairment could intensify gradually over a period of time and bring about small changes in an individual's capacity to carry out his work. Thus the history of the coal industry, with experiences such as these in mind, offers an interesting insight for disability studies scholars interested in isolation, marginalisation and oppression. It presents a challenge to blanket narratives of exclusion, but also places a responsibility on historians of other industries, perhaps, to see if the coal industry was alone in its employment of disabled people in industrial Britain.

While the compensation system ensured some sort of place for impaired men in the industry, it also performed a far more significant role than that in coalfield society, and, indeed, in British society more generally, from 1897 onwards. In fact, it might be argued that the compensation legislation passed in 1897, and amended on a number of occasions up to 1946, was fundamental to the creation of disability in British society. Establishing eligibility for compensation payments through medical diagnosis and, possibly, legal judgement created a category of disabled workmen that possessed certain rights in law. Deborah Stone's work posits disability as 'a juridical and administrative construct of state policy.'⁹ As Gleeson insists, this is just a construct and it tells us nothing about the lived reality of the disabled person's experiences of disability. Nevertheless, this designation of disability was extremely powerful, since, while it did not prevent poverty and was certainly not a permanent designation, it helped to determine access to compensation payments that were of real importance to the impaired miner and his family and could prevent reliance on the hated Poor Law.

Equally important, the compensation system, and especially its adversarial character, ensured that a vast bureaucratic and legal machinery developed to administer the scheme, and that trade unions and employers' organisations devoted a significant amount of their time and resources to the administration of disability. Coal companies and employer organisations spent huge sums of money on mutual indemnity policies to spread the risk of their compensation liabilities, while miners' trade unions devoted significant amounts of their finite resources to securing compensation payments for disabled members. Both sides purchased medical and scientific expertise to assist them in their battles over individual legal cases and utilised a number of different political and industrial strategies in attempts to influence the passage of legislation. In all these ways, therefore, disability was one of the fundamentally important organising principles of coalfield society and conditioned the industrial and political strategies of unions and employers. The fact that many of those fights continue even after

the closure in December 2015 of Kellingley, the last deep coal mine in Britain, speaks to the ultimate failure of both the state and employers to create a consistent model of adequate, liveable compensation for disabled members of the industry. Few things, possibly not even wages or working conditions, matched disability in importance in coalfield society.

One of the corollaries of this centrality of disability in coalfield society was that, relative to other groups of disabled people, in other times or places, disabled people in mining communities – at least, those affected by impairments resulting from paid work (mainly men) – were empowered by the considerable power exerted on their behalf by miners' trade unions. This power was not absolute, of course, and trade unions invariably came up against the greater power held by employers in the industry. In addition, trade unions could decide, as a result of a paucity of resources or a calculation as to the likely success of a particular case, not to put its full weight behind an individual's cause. Nevertheless, that unions campaigned for better working conditions to lessen the incidence of impairment, that they negotiated alternative jobs at the colliery, that they fought compensation cases through the courts and that they aided members to access welfare, medical and rehabilitation services, meant that disabled people in mining communities gained a powerful advocate that was able to make at least some improvements in people's lives.

The women of mining communities had fewer resources on which to draw in their battles for representation and improvement, but certain circumstances meant that the smaller scale of their campaigns was not necessarily a hindrance to their hopes of making progress. In particular, the maternalist politics pursued through the women's sections of the Labour Party, and conducted in the sphere of local government, coincided with national concerns over maternity and reproductive health. The growing 'toll of motherhood' in the 1930s, in particular, led to significant efforts to improve maternity services and lessen maternal mortality and morbidity, but it was arguably the development of sulphonamide drugs from the mid- to late 1930s that made the biggest impact here.

That such advocacy, for disabled men and disabled women, was based upon a medical model of disability is undeniable. Unions, similar to other organisations within the labour movement, looked to gain access to more and better medical and rehabilitation services, while women's organisations sought solutions to the problems of women's reproductive impairment through maternity services that were highly medicalised. Neither of these two broad political efforts gave much attention to the social factors that disabled impaired miners and women in the community. What efforts there were to ameliorate the social exclusion and isolation experienced by disabled people in mining communities tended to come in informal ways, through the small-scale, everyday support and assistance

given by friends, neighbours and local organisations. Such practical forms of support, whether visits to the homes of impaired miners, assistance to attend a local rugby game or help to old miners to complete their work underground, do not necessarily register in the historical record to any great degree, but they were practical manifestations of a communal spirit that looked to lessen hardship and improve life, even if only to small degrees. More study is required of unions as organisations of disability advocacy and with the potential to push for access to work and workers' rights for disabled people, much as recent research has explored disability-led organisations of the era such as the radical National League of the Blind.¹⁰

Nevertheless, despite such efforts, social isolation and marginalisation were still the experience of the majority of disabled people in mining communities. For the paraplegic miners confined to their beds, no number of visits from friends and former work colleagues could transform the desperate isolation of their daily lives, while even those miners with only early-stage chest diseases found their working capacity compromised, their earning ability lessened and their status impacted. More fundamentally, any degree of impairment that required a man to finish work, whether through injury or chest disease, removed that man from the sphere of work and cut him off from the source of a great deal of his identity, his social relations with friends and work colleagues and his status as a respectable working man who provided for his family. Other means were available to him to retain his authority as the head of the household and to retain social contact with others in the community, but it was clear that his life was changed significantly by his impairment. The ubiquity of disability meant that coalfield communities were arguably less disabling than other types of communities across Britain, but impairment was nevertheless a life-changing event with far-reaching, disabling consequences for everyday life.

Notes

- 1 Mike Foden, Steve Fothergill and Tony Gore, *The State of the Coalfields: Economic and Social Conditions in the Former Mining Communities of England, Scotland and Wales* (Sheffield: Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, 2014).
- 2 Jules Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales 1849–1851: The Letters to The Morning Chronicle. Vol. III The Mining and Manufacturing Districts of South Wales and North Wales* (London: F. Cass, 1983), p. 49; 'Socialist Campaign in South Wales', *Commonweal*, 27 August 1887, quoted in Ken John, 'Sam Mainwaring and the Autonomist Tradition', *Llafur*, 4:3 (1986), p. 65; Ferdynand Zweig, *Men in the Pits* (London: Society of Friends, 1948), p. 5.

- 3 John Williams-Searle, 'Cold Charity: Manhood, Brotherhood, and the Transformation of Disability, 1870–1900', in P. Longmore and L. Umansky (eds), *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 157–86.
- 4 Dot Jones, 'Workmen's Compensation and the South Wales Miner, 1898–1914', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 29:1 (1980), pp. 133–155.
- 5 For examples, see *The Eight Hours Movement (Coal Mines): Proceedings at a Joint Conference of representative coal owners and the Miners' Federation of Great Britain held at the Westminster Palace Hotel, London, S.W., on the 21st January, and the 11th February, 1891* (1891), pp. 10–11, 42–3; Coal Industry Commission, *Vol. I: Reports and Minutes of Evidence on the First Stage of the Inquiry*, Cmd. 359, (London: HMSO, 1919), xi, Evidence of William Straker and Vernon Hartshorn, pp. 322, 362–3.
- 6 Sarah F. Rose, *No Right to be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s–1930s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
- 7 B. J. Gleeson, 'Disability Studies: A Historical Materialist View', *Disability & Society*, 12:2 (1997), pp. 179–202.
- 8 Anne Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy in Britain since 1750: A History of Exclusion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 96.
- 9 Gleeson, 'Disability Studies: A Historical Materialist View', p. 189.
- 10 Mathias Reiss, *Blind Workers against Charity: The National League of the Blind of Great Britain and Ireland, 1893–1970* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).