



Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite/Natalie Thomlinson

Women and the Miners' Strike, 1984–1985

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reviewed by

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In January 1987, nearly two years after the end of the famous 1984–5 British miners' strike, journalist Bruce Anderson reviewed the edited collection »The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike« for the conservative »Sunday Telegraph«. At the time of writing, the battle over the memory of the bitter, year-long confrontation between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Thatcher government was in full swing. Under the headline, »Dangerous wives«, Anderson denounced the miners' struggle to defend pits and communities as »an attempt [...] to unleash a brutish Stalinism«, with miners' leaders demonstrating »utter contempt for democracy«. Anderson reserved particular opprobrium for the women's support movement, which had sprung up all across the coalfields in the spring of 1984. »Leftist meddlers«, Anderson claimed, had caused »lasting damage to miners' prospects of a tranquil home life«. He invited his readers to picture a miner back home from work at the pit. Instead of being treated to a hearty Yorkshire dinner and a steaming mug of tea by an apron-clad housewife, Anderson's imaginary miner was enjoined by his newly emancipated partner to help prepare a vegetarian dish. Instead of rushing off to the pub, he was expected to spend the evening looking after the children while »his wife goes out to her consciousness-raising session (women only)«.¹

For all the scorn that »Dangerous Wives« heaped on the miners and their supporters, arguably Anderson, too, had bought into a trope that gained ever more traction as the events of 1984/85 receded in time, namely that the year-long strike had revolutionised gender relations in the coalfields. It is precisely this trope, usually told in a »heroic« mode rather than in Anderson's caricatured version, which the historians Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson set out to complicate in their new monograph. »To complicate« is a verb that the authors use themselves, and it describes well their achievement in this superb study. »Women and the

¹ Bruce Anderson, Dangerous Wives, in: Sunday Telegraph, 18 January 1987; cf. Raphael Samuel/Barbara Bloomfield/Guy Boanas (eds.), The Enemy Within. Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984-5, London 1987.

Miners' Strike 1984-85« is not a demolition job that seeks to uncover the »real« story behind the myth, but, in an exemplary fusion of social and cultural history, takes seriously the emancipatory stories told about the strike by protagonists without taking them at face value. In doing so, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson show that the »heroic« narrative was but one script among others through which the lived experience of the strike could be told - albeit a particularly potent one. The »heroic« narrative was consciously promoted by key activists during the time of the strike itself; it became hegemonic only as the collective memory of the strike began to flatten out the complexity of lived experiences. There were other stories among strike-supporting women, as the authors show: of agony over the loss of hard-won affluence after the strike's ultimate failure; of shame at being reduced to recipients of charitable giving. There were also relatively undramatic stories of getting by in difficult times, often with the help of close relatives. On the opposite end of the spectrum, among coal communities who had refused to join the strike, there were stories of women who supported their non-striking loved ones throughout the duration of the dispute - stories about which we seldom hear today, because there is no redemptive cultural script available for them. It is to the book's great credit that the many complicated, troubled narratives are treated with the same seriousness and compassion as the more obviously positive stories of the strike activists.

The book's source base is remarkable. While 84 oral history interviews were conducted for this study, the authors do well not to lean too heavily on this body of source material alone. They have sifted through a wealth of sociological literature on the strike and its aftermath, and have also made excellent use of original documents, both from official archives and private collections. The study also benefits from the authors' exceptional command of the research literature on modern British history and of gender history. The book's four chronologically arranged main chapters take the reader through the dramatic events of 1984/85, from the »early days« to the »high noon« of the summer of 1984 to »crisis and drift« in the autumn, and ultimately »defeat« in the spring of 1985.

While these chapters are empirically rich and wonderfully nuanced in their discussion of the ebb and flow of the support movement, much analytical work is done in the four chapters that frame the chronologically arranged chapters. It is here that Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson succeed in putting the events of 1984/85 in perspective without negating their significance - a remarkable achievement given the books' focus and title. As they demonstrate convincingly, rather than the strike revolutionising gender relations in the coalfields, it would be more appropriate to argue that it was changed gender relations themselves that made the support movement possible in the first place. In other words, in order to understand what happened in 1984/85, we need to grasp the significance of the social and cultural changes that had been ongoing since the end of the Second World War. Among those changes was increased participation of women in the official labour market, greater female involvement in the trade unions and in the parties of the Left, and equally important, the rise in the ideal of companionate marriage. The socio-cultural change during Britain's »meritocratic moment« (Dean Blackburn)² provided the basis for the support movement to develop and gain momentum in 1984: Rather than »ordinary housewives«, seasoned campaigners, some of them members of the Communist Party of Great Britain, furnished the organisational backbone for »Women Against Pit Closures«. Meanwhile, rather than charitable giving, it was women's independent income from waged labour that kept many striking families going through twelve long months of struggle.

Indeed, as Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson make clear, the very idea of mining communities as residues of unreconstructed patriarchal traditionalism - a trope powerfully exploited for dramatic effect in such influential feature films as »Billy Elliot« (2000) and »Pride« (2014) - was simply no longer true by the early 1980s. On the eve of the strike, on key indicators such as household income, education, participation in the labour market, or family size,

² Cf. Dean Blackburn, *Penguin Books and Political Change. Britain's Meritocratic Moment, 1937-1988*, Manchester 2020.

coalfield communities in Britain were not much different from other working-class communities. While the cultural and social changes of the post-war years had done much to ›normalise‹ the miners' position in the class structure, the myth of the miner as both militant and traditional, as vanguard and residue, had been powerfully revived by the conflicts of the 1970s³ – and it was out of these tropes that the support movement built the narrative of political awakening of »ordinary miners' wives« that dominates today's public memory, and regrettably, also informs much scholarly literature.

Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson offer a wonderfully nuanced - and powerfully written – account that advances our understanding of the miners' strike as well as of post-war British social and gender history in general. »Women and the Miners' Strike« is a model of how history should be written, and of what scholarship can do to deepen our understanding of iconic moments in history. It is a landmark study that deserves a wide readership.

Zitierempfehlung

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³ Cf. Jörg Arnold, *The British Miner in the Age of De-industrialization. A political and cultural history*, Oxford 2023.