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The medium of the personal: poetry, gender and political struggle in mining life.

This workshop will draw upon poetry written primarily by women associated with the 1984-1985 miners' strike, available in a variety of publications produced during and in the aftermath of the strike. We shall argue that poetry offered a means of reflecting upon and communicating personal feelings and concerns which are not easily accommodated by the public language of political struggle. The strike demanded enormous sacrifices from those involved. These were endured as a rational response to a mine closure programme which was a real threat to future stability and prosperity but such sacrifice also depended upon continuing personal commitment and emotional attachment to the communal values and beliefs associated with a way of life. Poetry offered a medium through which commitment and attachment could be articulated. This was particularly relevant for women whose participation in struggle problematised the traditional gender relations of mining life. We shall examine this with reference to ambiguity around feminism and the feminist slogan that 'the personal is political'.

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Carol Stephenson is a Programme Director in Social Sciences at the University of Northumbria. Carol's work is also informed by personal biography. Brought up in the former steel community of Consett Country Durham she has a research and teaching interest in de-industrialisation and the implications for identity, community and class and gender inequalities. Her work has focussed on the political activism of the 1984-5 Miners' Strike and the consequences of de-industrialisation both in the UK and in the former coal fields of Nova Scotia, Canada.

Poetry and the politics of the personal: Women's creativity in the 1984-5 Miners' Strike.

Word count: 6537

Introduction

The paper draws on previous work and research with women involved in the strike but is based primarily upon the contents of publications dating from the period of the 1984-1985 miners' strike and immediately afterwards which contain examples of poetry written by female activists.

We have been collecting publications produced locally or by labour movement presses sympathetic to the strike, for a number of years. Those we have gathered vary in form from thin pamphlets to full sized books and contain a variety of writing by the women.

Much, though not all, of the writing in these publications might be categorised as naïve in the sense that it is not 'worked' or presented in any way as polished 'art'. Artistry, even when it was achieved, was not the main intention of the authors. Rather the writing was a medium of expression and communication through which the women attempted to delineate their perspective upon and experience of the strike. This is as true of the poetry as it is of the prose. The poetry is particularly interesting to us because as a form of expression, it facilitates writing from a personal perspective and at the same time offers opportunities for using, playing with and extending language. In this sense it was useful for women who through their engagement with the strike were entering territory which was unprecedented for them personally, and for which there was no ready discursive framework within which to account for their experiences and emotions. As a conventionally understood vehicle for articulating the personal, the emotional and the relational, poetry offers a particular set of insights into the motivations, the understanding and the struggles of the women involved in the miners' strike.

Adopting the poetic form, even at the most basic level of seeking to produce rhyme, offered the authors freedom to move outside the linear rationalism which characterises standard political writing and analysis. Poetry is more amenable than standard prose to the inclusion of gaps, silences and ellipses in the phrasing. Issues which are unresolved, ambiguous or which simply cannot be spoken can therefore be more easily included in poetry. At the same time a form of writing which is recognisably poetic in its intentions offers a licence to use words and turns of phrase which would seem odd in the context of prose, but which are acceptable in poetry and as such it can enable the writer to find ways of saying things which are otherwise difficult, it can help in the struggle to find meaning.

The following example illustrates for us many of the features of the women's published poetry. It is almost free writing, hardly constrained even by verse or rhythm, but it is clearly an effort to speak of the deep personal anxiety and sense of responsibility towards his family which marks the lives of miners. Written by a woman (J. Wilkinson of Easington colliery) it demonstrates the empathy of the woman with the man. That understanding in itself is held by the writer to be sufficient to explain the support of the women for the men involved in the strike. The poem is called 'The Dead of Night'. It could be a reflection by any miner on any normal night shift going out to work. Included in a book of writings by women working in the Easington kitchen during the strike, it could also be a poem about a picket and be saying something of the anxieties of the picketing miner in the face of the threat of injury or arrest or even death on the picket line. This is the poem:

*Get out of bed in the dead of night
To get the bairns a bite to eat
I rise a weary mite
I kiss the bairns goodnight and in
The silence lock the door
I may never open again.*

A number of the poems in these publications are written by women in the male voice. At one level, this suggests a strong empathy and a direct identification with the striking men which acknowledges the centrality of male labour in the struggle. To speak in the voice of another is in itself a creative act requiring imagination and performance. At the same time, it is emblematic of the extent to which female identities were subsumed and secondary in the masculine world of mining, of the lack of familiarity in speaking in a female voice from a female perspective and of the expectations of being heard only in certain terms. It is in this regard to speak from a position of powerlessness.

Writing about mining life by women who were living that life is not readily available in the public sphere. There is no genre of women's writing (or any other art form) in the same way as there are for example mining novels, poetry and art by men such as Sid Chaplin, Norman Cornish, or Tom McGuinness. There has been no equivalent of the Pitmen painters, nor even photographers such as are exhibited here today. Though there were important female photographers documenting the strike, they were not women of the coalfields. This does not mean of course that women from mining communities have never been writers and visual artists but rather that their voices have not been heard in these terms.

This is no doubt related to the masculinity of mining, the masculinity of the romantic tradition associated with work in the mines and the absolute nature of the sexual division of labour which not only excluded women from the mine but from the discourses and the cultural sphere which were directly associated with mining. The cultural imagery of mining life is associated primarily with male work and leisure. When women are visible in this sphere they are decentred, represented through the male gaze and the male voice. As we have argued elsewhere, stereotypes have been created of women from mining communities relating to domesticity, 'spirit' and spirituality which have to some extent demanded performance from women in those terms if they were to be recognised with reference to the authenticity of their 'mining' identities. Creative production by women undertaken in these terms did not include direct commentary upon mining itself but related rather to the crafts associated with their domestic domain.

The 1984-85 strike mobilised these traditional stereotypes of female identity in mining communities and this is evident in some of the poetry, but at the same time, it disrupted them. What began as a movement to support the men, became a movement in its own right, operating in its own terms and speaking in its own voice. As one of the poems says succinctly:

Whittle Wives

From fireside and family we ventured
Not sure of the perils we'd meet
Uncertain and stumbling, against all the odds,
We found ourselves up on our feet.

(verse 1 of 4 – Pat Davison, p. 38 'We are Women We are Strong' Northumberland Miners' Wives)

Female activists were plunged into direct political activity and struggle which challenged the notion that the economics and politics of mining were matters only for men. The strike demanded that those involved speak of its concerns: it was essential to justify the sacrifices, to understand the meaning of the social division and conflict it provoked, to find the means of arguing against opposition and to explain to outsiders the reasons for the dispute. At the same time, the experience of activism and communal struggle brought all those involved – not only the women – into new conditions of existence which challenged previous certainties and fixed identities. Sometimes these might be destabilising, frightening and intimidating, but they might also be creative, exciting and exhilarating. Certainly the opportunities for learning coupled with the intensity of the emotions of the strike offered a fertile ground for those who were inclined towards writing, and particularly poetry, as a means of expressing and communicating their thoughts and feelings relating to the miners' strike.

Women and Community

For women of mining families and communities, the strike not only brought their lives into the public arena of mining, but it also produced a sympathetic audience who were interested not only in mining as labour, but also as a way of life. Female life-worlds and concerns were included in the frame of interest insofar as the strike was about the future survival of the industry, and not simply about wages and conditions. Clearly, and especially in the climate of rising youth unemployment of the 1980s, the closure of mines meant the loss of secure and skilled employment, and an uncertain future for all those dependent on the industry. The broader labour movement understood the strike as emblematic of the survival of a particular industrial class structure and culture, and the socialist discourse which identified miners as the aristocracy of labour, was broadened to embrace the broader social landscape of mining life, to include anything which depended upon the health of the mining industry. Thus families, women and local neighbourhoods and communities became one of the reference points for struggle. The participation of the women, beyond the very practical act of feeding and supporting striking miners and their families, was grounded in the threat to their own sphere of family, neighbourhood and community relationships – broadly categorised as 'community'.

Not surprisingly, many of the poems written by women relate to community as an arena in which they could locate themselves and in which their participation in the struggle as women made sense to themselves and to others. Some of these poems work simply to describe the meaning of community for them. This is not the community of men – of institutions, politics and cultural activity, but of women. Community is personal and interpersonal. It is family life, a place of co-operative relationships and friendship, a place of calm, security and of safety. In the context of 1984, this was a world threatened not only by the closure of mines and other industries, but by the rising ethos of competitive individualism, uninhibited materialism and risk pursued by the increasingly powerful politics of neo-liberalism. Inherent in the women's poems there is a claim to an alternative value-system worthy of defence by women associated with the strike: For example:

The Colliery School

The school is small, three teachers in all
Three classrooms and just one hall
Not many kids they all know each other
Mainly because they're sister and brother

Everyone's welcome to come and see
What a happy school we can be.
(**Pauline** –BMWAG p7)

Woolley Colliery

Woolley Colliery that's what it's called
Coal and dust free for all
Dirt and grime everywhere
Out of chimneys and into the air.
...
Just two streets in a row
Friendly people nice to know
Down to earth nothing flashy
Sometimes sad and sometimes happy
Our men have the pit
Our kids have the school
We have a shop and a chippy too
....
All in all a happy scene
Even if the roads are not that clean
People talk and that's what matters
Coal and dust always scatters.
(**Pauline Watkins**, Barnsley Miners Wives Action Group, 1987, 13) (quoted in previous article)

The defence of such an ideal of community and the values it implied was pursued as a defence of real places and relationships which had previously been lived without much comment. The poetry about community suggests a growing self consciousness about the values of community as everyday life and relationships. Writing about these helped to delineate the nature of the threat and to assert the value attached to human relations, particularly as opposed to the philosophy of material gain and unalloyed profiteering associated with the threat of mine closure. So there is in this sometimes quite descriptive work, an underlying moral framework which became particularly dynamic in relation to the politics of the strike.

The following poem links survival itself with employment in mining and anticipates the extent of the loss that would be visited upon Easington should the pit close: (Photograph of Easington now?)

Easington Colliery, a place by the Sea

Easington Colliery a place by the sea
there is a pit here you can see
if this pit closes down how will we survive
for this pit work we have known all our lives,
with houses and family all around
church bells and others sound,
young people will have to move away
what will happen to our Village to-day,
no shops, no bus stops,

just you and me and the sea,
what will happen to the sick and the old
has all been told

Ellen Roberts p11 *The Last Coals of Spring: {Poems Stories and songs but the women of Easington Colliery (1985).*

The line 'just you and me and the sea' in particular suggests the fear of a total loss of both the social relationships and the physical infrastructure which made community possible in mining localities and the last line 'has all been told' suggests that people know of these things already with the implication that they need to become more alert to its significance.

As the conflict continued and intensified, increasing numbers of women were brought much nearer the centre of the action either because they became much more involved in campaigning and picketing, or because they found themselves invaded, intimidated and in confrontation with police who were deployed on their local streets which they considered their own territory. As the attention of pickets and police began to focus upon men who were returning to work, dehumanised by strikers as 'scabs' and seen as community traitors, the female positioning in the community sphere provoked broader questions about the relationships between mining community and the economy, the state, law and order. In this regard the women's poetry began to directly reflect their experiences of the strike. Poetry began to be used by some as a means of making sense of their experience, of communicating it and of releasing their heightened emotions about what was happening.

The following poem written in response to the police presence in Easington, could well be presented as an accompaniment to two of Keith Pattison's well-known photographs [\(Show these – Granville Williams pp 25 & 26\)](#). When it is read alongside the photographs, the women who appear at first sight as onlookers and defenceless, become more clearly actors and commentators on the drama:

A Place of its own

Easington Colliery a place of its own
We married our menfolk and made it our home
Now the boys in blue have taken it over
What you see down the street would knock you sober
In the last few weeks it's never been known
So many uniforms, you would think they had just been sewn
We couldn't believe the men on the beat
Could all march together down our main street
Were they going to the sea to get out of the heat
With utter disbelief at this faction
What was happening to cause this action
It was only men grouped to save their jobs
But it ended off pushing between men and bobs
How long do we have to live with this affair
Just a small community who don't want them there
I only hope at the end of this struggle
They will be there as quickly at any sign of struggle
We want to be friends for everyone's sake
For you still get robbers who just up and take

When we get back to work at the end of this strike
It will be left to the village bobby again to be liked.
Audrey Sillito p8 the last coals of spring.

As the women found their securities, values and expectations of communities challenged and threatened during the strike, so their emotions about the issues at stake in the strike were charged. The poetry offered a means of channelling anger and sorrow about their loss of trust in the police as the force of law and order, and also about the loss of friendship and relationships with men with men who had returned to work. On both counts there was a strong and continuing sense of betrayal which was to last well beyond the strike itself.

The Law Men

The Law enforcement officers
'Of *those* we should be proud?'
We're told they're keeping peace for us,
But watch them in a crowd.
Poor pickets maimed for trying to talk,
Just see the truncheons fly
'Brutality' 'Oh no, not us',
The uniformed thugs cry.
Those fine police they stand there
Like vultures ready to pounce
Waiting to cosh, kick and throttle
Each eager for his bloody ounce.
Brave constables dealing out justice
Remembering heavy pay packets
Mix in among us, cause plenty unrest
Wearing their NCB jackets.

Pat Davison We are women we are strong The stories of Northumberland miners wives 1984-1985 p 38).

Eeh lad, I watch you as you

Scurry by my gate
You head hung down as I frown
At a scab without mates
Many a word we've exchanged
Me and You at the gate
Now how I despise you
You a scab without mates
Many a mate you've put on
The dole
Behind prison bars too
You are responsible for pit closures
For the death of our community too
The manager doesn't greet you now

As you pass the colliery gates
I think he despises you as much as me
A blackleg. A scab without mates.
Betty October 1985 BMWAG p 41.

Could you talk to a creature

Who took the sun
Who killed his community
One by one
Who didn't care for the future of coal
Or for his mates he put on the dole
If you think that's right, you talk to a scab
But I'll never talk to that creature, the scab.
Betty October 1985. In BMWAG 40.

In these poems, experiences, relationships and emotions are linked with questions of law and order, justice, the economy. The values mobilised in the poems are thus the political values of the strike, but spoken in words which use the personal rather than a standard political language to convey meaning.

Struggle for meaning

Raymond Williams argued in his article 'Mining the Meaning', that in the strike there was a struggle not only over whether or not pits should close and on what terms, but over the very meaning of the words and concepts deployed in the dispute. Writing poetry clearly provided a vehicle for some women for carrying meanings in their own terms around issues which concerned them and in this sense they might be held to have added an extra dimension to the struggle for meaning.

Williams identified four keywords whose meaning was at stake in the miners' strike. These were Management, involving a struggle over the right to manage and with reference to what objectives; Economic, concerning what might be counted in the assessment of what was economically viable; Community, where real living community was pitted against an abstract construct; and Order, in which issues of law and order relate to the democratic or authoritarian nature of social order and what is at issue is the right to create social order in living communities rather than have a particular social order imposed.

We have suggested that the women were situated at the heart of the struggle for meaning around 'community' and that they addressed questions of the meaning of 'economic' and of 'law and order' from their personal experiences and understanding within the context of community which allocated them a legitimate role in the political struggle. Their concern with the meaning of management could connect less directly with their personal experience insofar they were excluded from underground work and outside the internal relationships of decision-making in the mine. However, they were concerned at a broader level with this issue, using the person of MacGregor, the chair of the coal board, as a metaphor for explaining the cynicism of management and its real concerns to manage the coal industry not for the sake of the industry, but for the sake of international capitalism:

Linda – Park Mill

In March of 1984, the coal board struck again,
If we act now and cause a strike we'll smash the N.U.M.

McGregor's philosophy was easy to see, he'd tried time after time.
He'd smashed British Leyland and then British Steel, and the next in his list are the mines,
But the miners they know and their wives know as well, the sort of thing he has in mind.
For hundreds of years they've had to cope, with the mentality of him and his kind,
But this time it is my fight as well as the miners, and this fight isn't just about coal.
I've three daughters at home that are growing up fast,
And they don't want a life on the dole.

So let's muster our forces, the whole working class,
They've done it before to our kind,
Let's stand up and tell them enough is enough,
If we all stick together we'll find
That there's plenty of people who are willing to fight,
They'll support us and help us along,
They've been waiting for years for a cause such as ours,
To fight for our rights can't be wrong.
So come on you working class women,
You mothers and mothers to be
This one's for our children and those yet unborn,
It's not just for you and for me,
Let's stand on the picket lines alongside our men,
Let's work in the soup kitchen too.
Let's collect money on the streets at the weekend
Let's show the world what we can do!
(Linda, BMWAG p8)

In this poem Linda highlights the partnership between men and women and refers to an historical understanding of the ongoing struggle against management which cares little for the well-being of workers. The first line of the second verse: 'So let's muster our forces, the whole working class' situating the struggle against managers solidly as one of class, but the reference to wives and daughters immediately personalises the class issue and the gender dimension is reiterated in the call to arms: 'So come on you working class women, you mothers and mothers to be...'

In this poem we find an example of a struggle for meaning which constantly refers back to the personal worlds of women. The problem of management is one of past, present and future and one which concerns women and children as well as men, and one in which personal lives are inextricably interconnected with a 'cause' that must be fought for.

It is unlikely that the four keywords which Williams identified in his short article were meant to be taken as exhaustive although they do clearly suggest a framework of meaning within which the discourse of the strike might be analysed. However, when the meaning of the women's poetry is taken into consideration, an added dimension of struggle comes to the fore in relation to the meaning of political - that of the personal and personal relationships, values and morality. The abstract and sometimes romantic terms in which the dispute was pursued in terms of trade unionism versus neo-liberalism, socialism versus capitalism, and the detailed discussion regarding industrial and social policy and decision-making are brought to earth in the women's language of the everyday, the personal and the emotional. For them there was no split between the personal and the political, as Elicia Billingham

expressed it: 'I think you only really know politics as to what happens to yourself' (BMWAG p59). This clearly differentiated them from the world of organised politics in the trade union and labour movement which was at the heart of the miners' strike.

Class and Gender/Feminism and Socialism

We have argued previously that many of the women who emerged as activist in the Miners' Strike had a previous history of participation in politics. There was no general movement from passive housewife to political activist. Different types of women, including women who did not belong to miners' families or mining communities took part and contributed their energies. However, it is apparent that the women who wrote poetry during and in the aftermath of the strike, were mainly women from mining families who had no previous history of formal political participation. We cannot be certain, but it appears from our research that conversely the women who had a history of conventional political activism did not in the main write poetry. If they did, they did not offer it for publication. This suggests that poetry offered an alternative medium of expression for those who were unschooled either in the systems and language of party and trade union organisation, in the language of political ideology, or in the language through which industrial disputes were conventionally debated. They found in poetry an acceptable means of 'speaking from the heart' about political matters. Significantly, the organisation of women as women created the environment within which such speaking became not only possible, but laudable. For it was an expression of a new confidence and power amongst women and a new centring of the female perspective in a class context.

To understand the significance of this, it is necessary to have some awareness of the class and gender politics of the early 1980s. The 1970s had seen a flowering of left wing activism and trade union militancy alongside a steady growth in the influence of 'second-wave' feminism. The election of Thatcher's conservative government in May 1987 spoke in part of a popular reaction against union militancy. Certainly the focus of the new government was upon destroying socialism and trade unionism. The miners' strike was seen by many on the left not only as a fight to defend mining, but as a class-based response to the depredations of conservative economic and social policy which was creating massive unemployment at the same time as reforming and cutting the welfare state. The cause of the miners was the cause of all those who were hurt by, silenced by and wishing to fight against the growing power of neo-liberalism and market-driven economics. First and foremost, the struggle was an organised labour struggle, but there were other groups loosely aligned with community politics and identity politics who were also threatened by Tory policy and ideology. And these groups, which included community workers, Gay rights activists, Black groups and a range of women's groups and organisations, made common cause with the miners and worked to support the strike (ref Spence WHN mag). Thus, although the activism of the women directly associated with miners was in the first instance a labour struggle in which issues of class were foremost, as the significance and meaning of the strike broadened, so too did the activists find themselves aligned with other groups whose issues and concerns became part of the miners' struggle. In so doing, these issues and concerns also became part of the language and the consciousness of the struggle, brought into the everyday life of the strike. Inevitably, women who might not otherwise have engaged with the issues raised, found themselves reflecting upon, and sometimes changing in response to these wider concerns, and central to these were questions raised by gender relations and inequality.

Second wave feminism had made an important contribution to the radicalism of the 1970s and its concerns had been given some formal political legitimacy by the Equal Pay Act of 1972 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975. At the time of the miners' strike, the women's movement was characterised

by a range of different groups and organisations – sometimes within larger organisations such as the trade unions and professional associations, sometimes campaigning groups and sometimes defined by loose networks and groups concerned with specific female issues. The idea of gender equality spanned the political spectrum and aspects of the women’s movement had remained contentious, particularly in its separatist versions. It was widely claimed that the idea of ‘women’s liberation’ had found its most fertile ground amongst the aspiring middle classes. Moreover, the popular media had kept up a steady campaign of ridiculing feminism on the one hand and presenting the working class woman as essentially conservative and traditional on the other. There had been some notable working class female struggles (office cleaners, Grunwick, Ford sewing machinists?) and some gains had been won for working women, but industrial organisations remained dominated by men and masculine cultures and the forms of organisation adopted by women’s liberation had hardly had any impact upon the structures, systems and language of conventional labour politics. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the miners’ union which had very few female members. Meanwhile, although increasing numbers of women were in paid employment, the sexual division of labour between home and workplace remained very much intact, and again, this was particularly evident in mining culture and society where sexual relationships and responsibilities were defined by the masculinity of the pit. Feminism was therefore nothing if not ambiguous for working class women and those ambiguities were particularly acute for women in mining families.

Clearly, the women who supported the miners’ strike organised themselves first and foremost in terms of the class politics of the strike and felt little sympathy for any form of separatism or of feminism as popularly represented. Their antipathy was apparent in the lines of their song written by Mal Finch – ‘side by side with our men’ and ‘Where Women’s Liberation failed to move, this strike has organised’. Yet the idea that it was legitimate for women to organise not only independently but also in their own terms and with reference to their own conditions of existence, was essentially one of feminism and feminist politics.

The importance of self-organisation is expressed most clearly in a poem by Anne Suddick:

Women

We, as women, wanted to help
We, as women, helped.

We, as women, wanted to March
We, as women, marched.

We, as women, wanted to tell
We, as women, told.

We, as women, wanted equality
We, as women, equalled.

We, as women, wanted direction
We, as women, directed.

Anne Suddick
Feelings Alive

Self organisation was reinforced by the support of feminists associated with the labour movement, with community activism, and with the anti-nuclear and peace movement, not only in the UK, but globally and active links were made between the women of the pit strike and a range of separatist female organisations and campaigns, most notably with the women protesting at Greenham Common. Thus whilst the question of employment and mining community and culture remained central, the conditions were created for raising questions about gender relationships and responsibilities which inevitably impacted upon the actual lives and relationships of those involved. Coping with changing personal and intimate relationships became an essential feature of the dispute in families where the women were actively involved in Women Against Pit Closures, impacting upon the men as well as upon the women concerned as the following poem indicates:

Betty Jan 85: 9No title – BMWAG p53)

Me and our lass tha knows, were wed in 78
And choose where tha went or what tha[t] (sic) did
A quieter lass tha couldn't meet
She cooked, she cleaned, she shopped and looked after t'kids
But summats happened to our lass since miners' strike began
I were always boss tha knows, whatever I said she did and never
A word did our lass say, choose what I said or did
But now, she's a right dragon, a force to be reckoned with
She fights them bobbies on t' picket line, just like a bomber kid
And it's not just outside tha knows, she's same in t' house and all
She's always at some meeting and shouting Coal not Dole
Aand leaving me? Boss of house, looking after t'kids
And woe betide me if I've not done the housework as she said
I welcomed her participation in the miners' strike tha knows
I thought it would get her out of t'house
Instead of sitting behind closed doors
I'm right proud of her really
Though I wouldn't tell
Her so
But I would like m y wife back, just like she was before
But I know already, I daren't bet a quid
Cos she knows she's got potential now, a thing
She never did
And it's no use telling Arthur, what the bloody
Hell he's done
Cos he's got one the same just now, and he knows

It's no fun
But looking at it seriously, our lasses are doing a
Right good job
And us men, we can't deny them, owt they say should be done
So we'll just help them write their history
For when all's said and done
The women in this strike tha knows helped the victory to be won.

Notably in this poem, the gender tensions devolve around responsibilities in the domestic sphere, and although they are resolved by gentle humour and the ultimate acquiescence of the man recognising the female contribution in the industrial sphere, nevertheless there were serious contradictions between the gender relations associated with the traditions of mining life and community which the strike was ostensibly defending, and the reality of the changes in gender relations and consciousness which were attendant upon the strike. These contradictions were expressive of a general tension between expectations relating to class politics on the one hand and gender politics on the other, but there were also specific tensions relating to the complexity of the female relationship to the male work of mining.

In supporting the strike, the women were supporting mining, and yet they were acutely conscious that in so doing they were defending male work which was acutely dangerous, which impacted upon long term health and which involved sacrifices on their part to support the rigours visited upon the men involved. The women often admired and respected their menfolk for undertaking such work, but the romanticisation of mining in the labour movement outside mining was contradicted by the real pressures and worries involved in mining life. A number of the poems attempt to express and explain this ambiguity and the emotions of the women who accepted it and lived with it, with reference to their support for the strike. For example, Margaret Foster's poem seems to ask from the wider public a respect and admiration for miners similar to that which she feels for her husband:

My knight in shining armour

September 1984

My husband is a miner,
To me he is my knight in shining armour.
He goes down a black hole,
So he can dig out coal.
And gets dust on his chest,
He has sweat on his vest.
I go to bed at night,
Hope and pray my man comes up to see the light.
If you think this is easy to do,
You try and work where there is not a loo.
Please remember when you put coal on your fire,
It has cost me like mine their life.
So remember, remember how much
It cost for that black ember.
(Last coals of spring, p 16).

But the ambiguities are clearest in the following poem by Ann Suddick:

The Black: A Poem by Anne Suddick.

I heard it in the cold night, in the darkness deep and wide,
I heard the cries of anguish, and I must admit I cried.
For the children and the people, when the living had to die,
When the mountain moved its muscle – and the Black began to slide.

When you're working in the bowls, do you ever look away
From the early, edgy, darkness of the never ending day?
Did you hear the crack of timber; did you feel the cry of pain?
Did you sense the night engulf you, - when the Black began to sway?

Do you ever voice the question, ask yourself just why.
You're fighting to retain your jobs, when you rarely see the sky?
Do you dwell upon the future, do your prospects pass you by
As you count the kids on corners, - when the Black begins to die?

Oh you not of mining listen, the collier's lot is dust.
Of artificial airways, machines, and noise and trust.
It's a special kind of human, works beneath the dark earth crust,
Who stakes his life and freedom – when the Black begins to crush.

Maybe need a summarising sentence or two here.

Conclusion

The women's poetry from the miners' strike is expressive of a unique and important moment in the history of mining life and community in which industrial politics of the labour movement met full force with the personal politics of feminism. The strike created the space for a distinctively female voice to be heard in relation to mining, and poetry provided a means whereby the personal and the emotional, the contradictory and the ambiguous might be expressed in the context of overall support for the strike and what it stood for.

The women in the miners' strike needed to conjoin labour and gender politics and to encompass language and emotions into a struggle for which there was no immediate precedent. Whilst feminism was problematic in the context of mining life and culture, the methods of organisation and development associated with feminism were fully deployed, most notably in the maintenance of female directed organisation and in the creativity of the range of campaigning and communication tools used by the women. Creative writing, and performance of poetry and song, in which the personal and the political are combined, played a part in this, dovetailing with traditions of creative writing associated with the Labour Movement which had long provided scope for the creative voices of men (see Sammy Palfrey). Through the dynamic relationships of the strike, writing specifically by women and dealing with women's concerns was now legitimated in the sphere of mining.

After the strike, some of the momentum for such creative expression amongst women was maintained and certainly in the 1992-1993 campaign against pit closures, there is evidence of women continuing to write poetry specifically about mining life and their lives as women in that context. However, with the loss of the mines, it is unclear how far the female poets have been able to develop their skills. Certainly Jean Gittins and Anne Suddick have continued to write and perform their poetry, but the masculinity of the male romantic tradition in labour politics and representations of mining life, continue to exclude female agency in anything other than their traditional sphere. Given the flowering of female writing during the strike, it is inconceivable that such writing has not continued into the present and there is perhaps an argument to be made to investigate where such work resides, and how it might be brought into public view in contemporary conditions. This is specifically with reference to the focus of the symposium rather than the chapter for the book!

I would quite like to put this in somewhere:

From an article by Stephen Moss 'A poetic moment' (the guardian 18/6/10) Asking an audience at a poetry 'slam' in Oxford, what is poetry for.

Don Paterson, (Poetry editor at Picador)

"if you burned every poem on the planet and you wiped every poem from every human mind, you would have poetry again by tomorrow afternoon," he says. "It's not something you do to language, so much as language does to itself under specific conditions – mainly the shortness of time and emotional urgency..." (p6)