



Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/130525/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Outram, Q (2018) BOOK REVIEW Cowie Miners, Polmaise Colliery and the 1984-85 Miners' Strike. *Labour History Review*, 83 (2). pp. 188-189. ISSN: 0961-5652

<https://doi.org/10.3828/lhr.2018.9>

---

This article is protected by copyright. This is an author produced version of a article published in *Labour History Review*. Uploaded with permission from the publisher.

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

Steve McGrail with Vicky Patterson (eds), *Cowie Miners, Polmaise Colliery and the 1984-85 Miners' Strike*, no place: Scottish Labour History, [2018], pp. 142, p/b, ISSN 1472 6041, obtainable from Stewart MacLennan, Scottish Labour History Society, 0/1, 64 Terregles Avenue, Glasgow, G41 4LW, £6 + £1.50 p&p.

This is the first in a planned series of occasional publications by *Scottish Labour History*, the journal of the Scottish Labour History Society. It consists of reprints of two pamphlets issued after the 1984-85 miners' strike: '*For as Long as it Takes!*': *Cowie Miners in the Strike, 1984-5* by Steve McGrail and Vicky Patterson and *One Year On: Sacked Polmaise Miners Speak Out*, edited by Steve McGrail. The former constitutes the bulk of the book. Jim Phillips supplies a short introduction. Polmaise Nos. 3 & 4 Colliery was located at the village of Fallin, a few miles east of Stirling, Scotland. Cowie was a neighbouring pit village and by the time of the strike it supplied some of Polmaise's workforce; other Cowie miners travelled to work in Castlehill Colliery in West Fife, 16 miles away, and some worked even further away. Cowie, not Fallin, is the focus of the book because it was there that the local Strike Centre was established. Polmaise Colliery was already on strike over threatened colliery closures in February 1984, a fact which has led Phillips to claim, to the surprise of some, in Yorkshire especially, that the 1984-85 strike started in Scotland, not in Cortonwood, near Barnsley, as is usually stated.

Steve McGrail had a varied career but he was never either a miner or an academic historian or sociologist. By the time he was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease around 2010 or 2011 he was most well-known as a performer of and a writer on folk-music. Before this he had worked as a psychiatric social worker in Newcastle and a lecturer in social work at Stirling University. It was from this latter base that he and his then partner Vicky Patterson made contact with the Cowie miners during the 1984-85 strike. Their motivation, 'to get an impression of the strike as they [the miners] experienced it' (18), sprang out of their politics; according to his widow, Sue Harley, McGrail was 'well entrenched' (6) in his local Labour Party politics by the time of the strike. McGrail and Patterson followed a methodology which included (thank heaven!) the use of a tape recorder and, it would seem, a decision to speak to and get to know a small number of miners over a long period, rather than to try and question a large number of miners for short periods. The miners they quote are mainly the membership of the Cowie Strike Committee and it is a tribute to the quality of the reporting that by the end of '*For as Long as it Takes!*' the reader feels that they know these eight men well.

They come over as a reflective and independently minded group. Many came from mining families in which they were the third or even fourth generation to go down the pit. Older members were well aware of the miners' history, either directly experienced (the 1974 and 1972 strikes, the Polmaise lock-out of 1938) or as retailed to them by grandfathers and others (the 1926 General Strike and mining lock-out). Divisions between older and younger miners, the latter often accused by outsiders of being incapable of sustained industrial action, burdened as they were by

mortgages and hire-purchase debts and interested only in Spanish holidays, failed to emerge. They offer a trenchant, knowledgeable and critical commentary on the events of the strike which deepen the reader's understanding of it.

Cowie was not, of course, at the centre of events during the strike. Above the Cowie Strike Centre and another fourteen similar strike centres in the area was the Fishcross Area committee. There were six such Areas in Scotland and over these stood the headquarters of the National Union of Mineworkers in Edinburgh. One thus looks for, and finds, material about the local organization of the strike. The chapter 'Organizing the Strike' offers a history the like of which this reviewer has not seen elsewhere: it details the 'spontaneous' creation of a democratic but efficient and disciplined organization. It notices a system of fines put in place to ensure that strikers did not miss meetings and did not miss picket duty. The chapter on 'The Kitchen' notices one problem, however, which was the failure of women to participate. The authors note that Cowie miners never asked women to participate (37) and it is clear that this was not from fear of accusations that the miners were projecting gender-typical roles on to the women of the community. A later chapter notes bluntly that 'Women played almost no part in the miners' strike in Cowie –or at least no public part' (79). The three-and-a-half-pages of this chapter go on to document this but not to explain it. Jim Phillips's introduction attributes it to 'the relative absence of Communist politics in Stirlingshire' (12) and he points out that Scottish women's support groups were usually led by communists. This has also been argued more generally in Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite's recent article ('National women against pit closures: gender, trade unionism and community activism in the miners' strike, 1984-5') in *Contemporary British History* (32(1), (2018) 78-100) but the CP was not the sole possible source of leadership as Sutcliffe-Braithwaite also demonstrates. The women's movement itself was important, particularly those women who had had involvement in Greenham Common (and in Scotland in the Faslane peace camp?) and so, remarkably, was the Lesbian and Gay movement. The local Labour Party, another possible source of leadership was also, despite McGrail's involvement in it, conspicuous by its absence. So the absence of women remains a puzzle. It is however, valuable to have it documented; the towering strength and indomitable courage of miners' wives everywhere (except, of course, in Nottinghamshire) is in danger of becoming another one of the myths of miners' history.

This absorbing book would have been easier to read by this shame-facedly monoglot reviewer if it had been supplied with a short glossary of the Scottish tongue, in both its formal and informal versions. We are fortunate these days to have both the *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, which includes *the Scottish National Dictionary*, and the *Scottish Vernacular Dictionary* available online but these often leave one wondering whether one has caught the correct meaning of the words in front of one. And in one case ('this is a steak-pie strike here' (61)) they offer no solution at all.

*One Year On*, at 37 pages, is a shorter publication than *'For as Long as it Takes!'* It consists of a series of accounts of their victimization after the strike by five Polmaise miners and a complementary account by John McCormack, formerly the NUM Delegate at Polmaise, who struggled for their re-instatement. Their accounts are now all-too-familiar histories of arbitrary management backed up by a similarly arbitrary criminal and civil justice system. The possibly unfamiliar element in the story is the failure of the NUM to support the victimized with either efficacy or efficiency.

By the end of this book and over thirty years after the events at the centre of it one cannot help but wonder what happened to the men whose voices have been so clearly caught by McGrail and Patterson. A final, previously unpublished, piece by Jim O'Hare with Sue Harley goes some way towards supplying this want. O'Hare was employed at Polmaise and victimized after the strike but his story does not appear in *One Year On*. He relates how, a year after the strike, he signed on for unemployment benefit, then worked as a builder's labourer, then took up an offer Stirling Council made to the sacked miners to work on the dustbins, and then worked at a number of other jobs. He tells of a holiday in the USSR as a guest of the Soviet miners. Finally, in 2000, he was offered a job in the Longannet mining complex and took to it like 'a duck to water' (141). But within a year he was made redundant. Harley remarks that his memories of the strike are very vivid and that he still wants an enquiry, to lay 'the unfinished business' to rest (142).

In a foreword, Harley writes that she was moved to re-publish these accounts by the government's decision in October 2016 not to hold an enquiry into the policing at Orgreave in June 1984. These accounts will serve well to remind us of why such an enquiry remains necessary and encourage us to continue working to expose the truth of the events at Orgreave and of the strike from which those events emerged.

Quentin Outram, *University of Leeds*