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'Struggle or Starve': life in the South Wales Coalfield for working-class women c1900-1939

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The Open University

A329 The Making of Welsh History 2019-2020 Dissertation

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'Struggle or Starve': life in the South Wales Coalfield for working-class women c1900-1939

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Chapter 1. An Introduction

Industrialisation and particularly the expansion of the South Wales Coalfield for steam coal from around 1850, triggered a dramatic reconfiguration of the demographic of Wales. South Wales became an industrial and commercial hub, with mass in-migration primarily, but not exclusively, from surrounding Welsh and English counties. The scale and speed of the expansion provided plentiful employment opportunities, and the chance of a better life attracted a huge influx of working-class families and significant numbers of single men. For example, in the Rhondda, the 1891 census records 167 males for every 100 females in the 15-34 age group.¹ The coalfield towns showed phenomenal growth, in the Rhondda valleys alone a population of under 2000 in 1851 had reached over 152,000 by 1911.² Indeed, the 1911 census revealed that over two thirds of the entire population of Wales was crowded into the counties of Glamorgan, Monmouth and Denbigh.³ Crucially, the infrastructure to support and sustain such exceptional growth had not kept pace, and as Jenkins put it 'Edwardian Wales was marked by a high degree of economic inequality. Most working-class people lived in small overcrowded houses without lavatories, baths or piped hot water'.⁴

Industrialisation created thousands of jobs for Welshmen within their own country, reducing the scale of economic migration seen elsewhere, but for Welsh women 'in the short-term, industrialisation destroyed women's jobs'.⁵ Dominated by mining and heavy industry, and without the greater diversity of the more commercialised centres of Swansea and Cardiff, there were limited opportunities in the coalfields for gainful employment open to women. Indeed, Williams and Jones concluded that 'one of the most striking findings is that by the beginning of the twentieth century, only 14

¹ Dot Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal: Women's Lives in the Rhondda, 1881-1911' in *Our Mothers' Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830-1939*, Angela V. John (ed.), Cardiff, University of Wales Press, (2011 [1991]), p. 114

² Deirdre Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows: A History of Women in Twentieth Century Wales*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, (2000), p. 9

³ A Vision of Britain Through Time, 1911 Census, available at: <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/EW1911PRE/2> Accessed 5 April 2020

⁴ Geraint H. Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales*, Cambridge University Press, (2007), p. 232

⁵ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 10

percent of women over the age of ten were working in the Rhondda district', which equated to one woman in every seven, compared with one in three in England.⁶ Consequently, dependent on the male wage alone, the valley communities became synonymous with social deprivation, ill health and endemic poverty. Life was governed by hard, physical, and frequently dangerous work, punctuated by economic fluctuations and industrial unrest, and lived in overcrowded, sub-standard, often squalid housing, without basic amenities, poor sanitation, and inadequate healthcare.

This dissertation will examine the lived experience of women in the mining communities, assessing how the environment and societal perceptions of gender roles shaped their lives. In the late Victorian period this was a male-centric society where Welsh Wales met with Anglicised Wales in a clash of cultural traditions, where monoglot Welsh speakers mingled with monoglot English or bi-lingual, and was dominated by patriarchal ideology embedded within Non-Conformism, and Liberalism. Consideration will be given to the importance of these factors to women's lives, and to the evolution of a distinct class-consciousness and desire for change, bolstered by the rise of socialism. Using primary source records, autobiographies and oral testimonies, a detailed insight has been given into a broad spectrum of life in the urban industrial environment, and three collections of memoirs, *Struggle or Starve* (2009 [1998]) edited by Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams, the autobiography of Elizabeth Andrews *A Woman's Work is Never Done* (2006 [1957]) and *Growing up in Wales 1895-1939* edited by Jeffrey Grenfell-Hill, have been especially informative. Discussion of the impact of the First World War and the crippling poverty and unemployment created by the global economic depression of the 1920s-30s, will endeavour to show how women demonstrated a growing political activism, inspired by the Labour Movement and female enfranchisement, and in conclusion, a short assessment of how far coalfield women, frustrated by their socio-economic and cultural landscape, were able to 'break the chains that held them to

⁶ L. J. Williams and Dot Jones, 'Women at Work in Nineteenth Century Wales' in *Llafur The Journal of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History*, Vol. 3, p. 30, available at: <https://journals.library.wales/view/1326508/1327349/21#?xywh=-1886%2C6621%2C4304> Accessed 12 April 2020

their kitchens, they thought for themselves and they changed the history of the valleys.⁷

In the introduction to the first edition of her ground-breaking work *Our Mother's Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830-1939*, Angela V. John wrote that 'the history of Welsh people has often been camouflaged in British history, yet women have also been rendered inconspicuous within their own Welsh history the emphasis has been placed on celebrating the land of our fathers rather than viewing Welsh history from the equally valid perspectives of women.'⁸ Where women have appeared in recent historiography of the Welsh, the focus has tended to be on their domestic roles and support during socio-economic unrest and protest. A commentary on recent studies of Welsh Women's history concluded 'Too often the only record of women's lives comes in the form of that most perishable and woefully unrecorded of all historical sources, oral testimony. Welsh women have thus been denied a literate past by the mutually reinforcing influences of academic prejudices and an incomplete historical record.'⁹ Beddoe has argued that women's history as an academic discipline, grew from the impetus given by the women's movement in the 1970s,¹⁰ thus in the last forty years, the historiography of the lives of Welsh women across the social spectrum, has grown exponentially, seeking to redress their lack of presence in Welsh history, through autobiographical accounts, oral histories, journals, biographies of prominent Welsh women, governmental and institutional records, and in literature.

Beddoe in *Out of the Shadows*, postulated that the 'economic, social, and political state of Wales had a distinct bearing on women's lives, but one single factor exerted more influence than any of these – the doctrine of separate spheres'¹¹. Indeed, to quote Williams, 'few regions of Britain have been, over generations, so totally immersed in so macho a perception of work, the home and the relations between the

⁷ Maggie Pryce Jones, 'Chrysanthemum is Hard to Spell' in *Struggle or Starve*, (2009, [1998]), Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams (eds.), Honno, Dinas Powys, p. 314

⁸ Angela V. John (ed.), *Our Mother's Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830-1939*, (2011 [1991]), Cardiff, University of Wales Press, p. 9

⁹ Martin Wright 'Whose Past? Whose Future? An exploration of women's history in Wales' in *Equal Opportunities International*, Vol. 19, Issue 2-4, (2000), available at: https://search-proquest-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/docview/199563154?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprim

¹⁰ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 4

¹¹ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 12

sexes.’¹² It was this iteration of middle-class Victorian domestic ideology, which became entrenched within the South Wales coalfield, underpinned and enshrined within Non-Conformism, creating that archetypal stereotype the ‘Welsh Mam’. Beddoe’s study focuses on women’s daily lives revealing how valley women’s self-identity came to be formed and nurtured. *Our Mother’s Land* features a collection of essays on several diverse topics, but most relevant to this dissertation, Dot Jones’s *Counting the Cost of Coal: Women’s Lives in the Rhondda, 1881-1911*, and Beddoe’s chapter on *Munitionettes, Maids and Mams*. Two further studies, *Rocking the Boat: Welsh Women who championed Equality, 1840-1990*, edited by John, and *The Very Salt of Life: Welsh Women’s Political Writings from Chartism to Suffrage*, edited by Jane Aaron and Ursula Masson, acknowledge the contribution of remarkable, mostly middle-class women from across the Welsh diaspora including some English born, to the history of Welsh women. However, it is ‘history from below’, the many personal memoirs and anecdotes which have given generations of ordinary Welsh women their rightful place in the history of Wales. Elizabeth Andrews, the first Women’s’ organiser for the Labour Party in Wales, herself the product of a working-class mining family from the Rhondda, referenced the formative influence of life in early twentieth century coalfield society, when she wrote ‘we were toldoften very patronisingly by men – that woman’s place was to fit the child for the world. We retorted if it was woman’s place to fit the child for the world, it was also her place to fit the world for the child’.¹³ This dissertation will seek to offer a modest contribution to the study of how Welsh women strove towards this goal.

¹² Williams, G.A., ‘Women Workers in Wales, 1968-82’, in *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 11, nos. 1-4, p. 530, available at <https://journals.library.wales/view/1073091/1078288/553#?xywh=-492%2C1638%2C3894%2C2057> Accessed 1 August 2020

¹³ Elizabeth Andrews, (2006 [1957]), *A Woman’s Work is Never Done*, Ursula Masson (ed.) Dinas Powys, Honno, p. 20

Chapter 2. Living Conditions

I didn't know we were poor when I was a child,
no one told me as I dreamed my dreams.
I only remember the gleaming brass fender,
a chariot of fire in the flickering flames.¹⁴

Taken from a poem by Margaret Lloyd born in Merthyr in 1930, this poignant extract reflects the nostalgia which characterises many oral histories and memoirs. Despite varying levels of poverty and deprivation, most look back with an affectionate yet pragmatic acceptance of the realities of their environment. The dearth of adequate, good quality housing remained a critical problem well into the twentieth century, resulting in severe overcrowding. People would accept anything available; in 1899 the MOH (Medical Officer of Health) for the Rhondda, declared over five hundred cellar dwellings without natural light and adequate ventilation as unfit for human habitation,¹⁵ yet lack of alternative accommodation prevented their closure. A report by the MOH for Merthyr for 1909 revealed that there had been little or no concerted effort to improve the standard or availability of housing stock in the valleys,¹⁶ and the extent of overcrowding is revealed in a snapshot from the 1911 census which showed that although housing had roughly doubled numerically between 1891 and 1911, the average household size had only slightly reduced from 6.5 to 5.8.¹⁷ Overcrowding was compounded by serious deficiencies in infrastructure. The provision of an adequate mains water supply and sewage disposal system in many areas has been described as 'derisory'.¹⁸ Many households relied on standpipes in the street for their water supply, and WC's (often simply ash-closets or pails) were

¹⁴ Margaret Lloyd 'Childhood Poverty' in *Struggle or Starve* (2009 [1998]), Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams (eds.), Honno, Dinas Powys, p. 59

¹⁵ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 15

¹⁶ Quoted in the Cardiff Times and South Wales Weekly News, 7 May 1910, available at: <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3415917/3415924/178/infant%20mortality%20south%20wales%20coalfields> accessed 5 June 2020

¹⁷ Dot Jones in 'Counting the Cost of Coal', p. 116

¹⁸ Bill Jones 'Banqueting at a Moveable Feast: Wales 1870-1914' in *The People of Wales*, (1999), Jones, G.E. and Smith, D. (eds.), Gomer Press, P. 155

commonly down the bottom of a small garden. Dot Jones reported that even as late as 1920, only 2.4 per cent of the working-class homes in the Rhondda had baths.¹⁹ The Public Health Act of 1875 gave authorisation for local authorities to provide for sewage disposal, fresh water supplies, and regulation of housing and the urban environment, yet being permissive powers rather than mandatory, implementation was slow. Mains sewers were finally installed for the Rhondda, by then with an urban population of close to 100,000 by 1894, and it was not until 1912 that the second of two essential reservoirs to provide adequate mains water was completed.²⁰

Despite some progress then, Bill Jones writes that 'much of Wales's housing was the hotbed of diseases like tuberculosis, cholera, typhus, and diphtheria, and the poor living conditions people had to endure can be measured in the high mortality rates, especially those of infants and children.'²¹ Local rivers in the valleys exacerbated the dangers to human health, the Rhondda MOH report in 1893 describing the river as filled with human and animal excrement, waste from the slaughterhouse, rotting carcasses and a plethora of general refuse, furthermore 'the water is perfectly black from small coal in suspension. In dry weather, the stench becomes unbearable.'²² Childhood memoirs highlight the realities of living conditions. Mildred Evans, born to a mining family in 1920 near Tonypany and the youngest of eleven children, wrote 'we lived in a rented terrace house, owned by a landlord. Three bedrooms upstairs, two rooms downstairs (a front room and a kitchen), a lavatory outside and no bathroom. All houses were neglected.'²³ Mary Kingston, a miner's daughter born in Treorchy in 1908 recalled 'floods used to come in periodically from the river at the back, the Taff. We had to put sacks, planks up. We were upstairs, up in the bedrooms.....one day I was cleaning the pantry and a rat went right over me from the river. It was terrible. The hygiene was dreadful. It was a wonder we survived'.²⁴ Most valley housing was plagued by infestations of

¹⁹ Dot Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal' p. 117

²⁰ Dot Jones, 'Counting the Cost of Coal' p. 117

²¹ Bill Jones 'Banqueting at a Moveable Feast: Wales 1870-1914', p. 155

²² Dot Jones 'Counting the Cost of Coal' p. 118

²³ Mildred Evans in *Growing up in Wales 1895-1939*, (1996), Jeffrey Grenfell-Hill (ed), Gomer Press, Llandysul, p. 164

²⁴ MWL archive no. 8539 recorded by R. Scadden 1996, available at:

https://museum.wales/welsh_womens_history/2_living_conditions/ Accessed 4 August 2020

cockroaches and other vermin. Edith S. Davies born in Ynysybwl in 1907 recalled 'it was impossible to get rid of the cockroaches which came home in the miner's clothes.....after lights out in the houses they emerged in their hundreds and if perchance a light were suddenly switched on, there they were scurrying in every direction.....even one cockroach is loathsome. We children called them 'black pats' and shuddered at the sight of them'.²⁵

Along with arguably dire standards, overcrowding became the hallmark of valley housing. Housing shortage, a booming fertility rate, and poverty forced many families to share to keep rents down. Dot Jones, looking at the Rhondda, concluded that 'most people lived in households of six or more. The sample also shows that a quarter of households shared houses because it was usual ... In effect, therefore, three-quarters of Rhondda's inhabitants either shared with another household or else were part of a household of six or more.'²⁶ Jones's data was extrapolated from the census of 1881, yet significantly she writes 'thirty years later not much had changed.'

Taking in lodgers, like sharing a house, was an acceptable method of boosting household income, or reducing rents. Lodgers were often relatives or 'Welsh uncles,' for whom many women recalled a deep emotional attachment. Although at times a source of tensions within a household, case studies reveal the critical financial support lodgers were able to provide during strikes and times of hardship. Arguably, for the miner's wife the domestic burden was considerable, and Dot Jones gives the example of Elizabeth Morgan whose household contained four miners in addition to her husband and five children, two of whom in 1881 were already working underground.²⁷ Lodgers could also be transient, and it was not unknown in cramped households, for lodgers working different shifts to share beds. Regardless of the size of the household, most dwellings were small cramped rows of terraces and a uniform configuration, as Edith S. Davies recalls: 'I suppose we were a typical miner's family in that we used the back kitchen as a living room cum dining room, bathroom, laundry room and playroom rolled into one'.²⁸ Sparsely furnished with a scrubbed kitchen table, a sofa, armchair and kitchen chair, the coal fire was the hub of the

²⁵ Edith S. Davies 'The Innocent Years' in *Struggle or Starve* (2009 [1998]), Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams (eds.), Honno, Dinas Powys, pp. 54-5

²⁶ Dot Jones 'Counting the Cost of Coal' p. 119

²⁷ Dot Jones 'Counting the Cost of Coal' p.120

²⁸ Edith S. Davies 'The Innocent Years' p. 52

room and maintained night and day. There was a middle or 'state occasion' room which housed a dining suite including a Welsh dresser – 'the pride of my mother's heart,' and a small front room 'often furnished and frequently let to another family, as people were too poor to pay the few shillings rent for a whole house.'²⁹ Three small bedrooms, each with a small coal fireplace, lit only in times of illness, with another important feature 'decorously concealed beneath each bed, behind the valance, ... the essential chamber pot, as a trip to the *Ty Bach*³⁰ in the middle of the night was unthinkable',³¹ completed the accommodation. Davies indicates that her family struggled financially, yet other memoirs reveal a far greater deprivation by comparison. Beatrice Wood was born into a family of five children in Dowlais in 1916 in a run down two up-one down house, where the whole family shared a living room cum kitchen 'it contained a Welsh dresser, a wooden table covered with a blanket, an enamel bowl placed on an orange box under the tap to act as the 'sink' the only cooking utensils were one kettle and one iron saucepan'.³² Despite such stark conditions, even Wood recalled 'As bad as we were, there were people a lot worse off than us,' describing a family that 'never owned a cup – they used to drink out of jam jars or half pint milk bottles. They didn't even own a kettle and couldn't afford one. They boiled their water in a dried milk tin'.³³

Life in the valleys, therefore, was characterised by the constant struggle against poverty, poor living conditions and hard physical labour. As Dot Jones commented women paid a high price 'the unremitting toil of childbirth and domestic labour killed and debilitated Rhondda women as much as accident and conditions in the mining industry killed and maimed Rhondda men'³⁴ Since daughters were expected to assume some household responsibilities as they grew up, particularly in childcare, it is hardly surprising that by the early twentieth century, a growing desire for change can be detected amongst the younger generation.

²⁹ Edith S. Davies 'The Innocent Years' p. 53

³⁰ Ty Bach – little house or outside toilet

³¹ Edith S. Davies 'The Innocent Years' p. 53

³² Beddoe in *Out of the Shadows*, p. 88

³³ Beatrice Wood 'Wednesday's Child' in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 88

³⁴ Dot Jones 'Counting the Cost of Coal' p. 124

Chapter 3. 'A woman's work is never done'³⁵

'I was born in the curve where the mountain merged into the hollow of the valley.

When I climbed the mountain and looked down on the valley, I thought it was beautiful and, like roes in the belly of the herring, the houses nestled together, warm and snug.'³⁶

This extract from the memoir of Nessie Williams, raised in Eastern Monmouthshire, maintains the theme of nostalgia. Mair E. McClellan born in Pentre in 1928 recalls 'we were street children in a very real sense of that phrase.We did not only play in the streets, the mountains then were open to us, the Maindy mountain in particular',³⁷ and for Maggie Pryce Jones from Trelewis 'the summers seemed to be always long and always hot when we were children. We lived out of doors.'³⁸ Children lived and played in their streets and in the mountains and hills of the valleys, safe in the security of extended family and close-knit communities. In a deeply Non-Conformist society, social activities for women and children revolved around the Chapel, Sunday School, Band of Hope meetings, Eisteddfodau, and such like. Holidays were generally rare unless spent with relatives in rural areas, so picnics and Sunday School outings were the norm, and formed the highlight of their summers. Yet childhood was short lived. As Crook put it there was 'no special creation of a children's world; children were expected to be part of the adult world in terms of manners and behaviours, and this included adult values.'³⁹

Separate spheres demanded that the reality of daily life for working-class women was predicated on servicing the needs of their men and families, as Beddoe remarked 'Housework was a class-specific activity: only women and girls did it'.⁴⁰ As a result 'when women had no choice but to work at home, they elevated the status of

³⁵ Acknowledgement to Elizabeth Andrews *A Woman's Work is Never Done*, (2006[1957]), Honno, Dinas Powys

³⁶ Nessie Williams 'My Childhood in the Valleys' in *Struggle or Starve* (2009 [1998]), Carol White and Sian Rhiannon Williams (eds.), Honno, Dinas Powys, p. 45

³⁷ Mair E. McClellan 'Shadow on the Wall' in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 60

³⁸ Maggie Pryce Jones 'Kingfisher of Hope' in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 104

³⁹ Rosemary Crook, 'Tidy Women: Women in the Rhondda between the wars' in *Oral History* Vol. 10, 2, p. 43, available in *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40178717. Accessed 29 June 2020

⁴⁰ Beddoe in *Out of the Shadows*, p. 18

that work by adding ritual to it. This then became a norm, a standard to live up to, and gradually acquired the status of a moral principle.⁴¹ Just as miners shared a close-knit, mutually supportive and self-regulating bond, above and below ground, for valley women 'a similar network of colleagues and friends existed....and it was this that influenced the behaviour of women within it...a consensus of moral beliefs...they agreed about what was essentially right or wrong without hesitation and the source of this certainty lay mainly in religion'.⁴² Since most women had originally come from Welsh speaking, strictly non-conformist stock, the philosophy that 'cleanliness is next to godliness' dictated and directed the social codes of behaviour and standards by which they lived. Failure to conform could mean social exclusion, although this was apparently rare. For miners wives 'there was an order about every part of housework and a 'set' day for each task'⁴³; starting with the washing on a Monday, housework followed a predictable pattern throughout the week, both indoors and out, the house was scrubbed, swept, dusted, and polished from top to bottom. High standards, the benchmark by which women judged each other, were regarded as a triumph over the adversities of the never-ending dirt and coal dust 'reflected in polished surfaces and conveyed to neighbours by shining doorknockers and scrubbed doorsteps.'⁴⁴ Many testimonies emphasize the importance attached to such rituals. May Jenkins born in Swansea in 1905, recalled her mother religiously scrubbing the outside toilet 'it was like the driven snow. It was scrubbed so much that the wood was white And it was done every day of her life'. She concluded that by Friday night 'the place – it was not looking clean; it was sparkling It used to sparkle. Honestly, ... the place used to sparkle. It was a treat.'⁴⁵ Another informant proudly recalls that she 'used to wash the path from the back door right down to the toilet And then the front, flagstones was in the front then, and I used to wash the pavement from the front door, right past the window and down to the drain Beautiful, lovely'.⁴⁶ Notwithstanding the severe economic conditions

⁴¹ Rosemary Crook, 'Tidy Women: Women in the Rhondda between the Wars', p. 43

⁴² Rosemary Crook, 'Tidy Women: Women in the Rhondda between the Wars' p. 40

⁴³ Rosemary Crook, 'Tidy Women: Women in the Rhondda between the Wars' p. 42

⁴⁴ Beddoe, 'Munitionettes, Maids and Mams, Women in Wales 1914-1939' in *Our Mother's Land*, Angela V. John, (ed.), (2011 [1991]) p. 200, University of Wales Press, Cardiff

⁴⁵ MWL archive no. 7251. Recorded 1986, available at:

https://museum.wales/welsh_womens_history/9_weekly_routine Accessed 4 August 2020

⁴⁶ Rosemary Crook 'Tidy Women: Women in the Rhondda between the Wars' p. 42

between the wars, Beddoe comments 'even on their reduced incomes such women spent money weekly on polish (floor, boot and metal), soap and washing powder.'⁴⁷

Washing and ironing were particularly arduous activities. Gwen Davies born in Dowlais in 1896, recalled washing every night, to ensure that there were clean clothes for the men in the morning, and this was in addition to the normal household wash load. In an interview recorded in 1972, she maintained – 'We worked hard. They've begrudged paying the colliers – the wives should have two pounds for washing their clothes, I'm telling you!'.⁴⁸ Arguably the most contentious household burden for valley women was coping with the demands for baths. Without bathrooms and when pit-head baths were still a pipe-dream for mining communities, bathing was commonly in a tin bath in front of the kitchen fire, or for poorer families such as Beatrice Woods's, half a large beer barrel with cut-outs for handles.⁴⁹ This required miners' wives to heat numerous kettles or buckets of water over the open fire, a physically demanding and frequently hazardous procedure for women, and incidentally, innumerable small children who were scalded to death by tumbling into baths of hot water, as several memoirs attest.⁵⁰ Where there were several miners in the household, this routine could be repeated up to three times a day, depending on shifts, but for the rest of the household Saturday night baths were the norm and as Beatrice Wood wrote 'if you were lucky enough to be first in the bath you would have lovely hot water-but if you were the last then the water could be cold and not too clean.'⁵¹

Managing the family budget to pay the bills and feed her husband and family, placed enormous strain on the resources of the miner's wife. One respondent described a typical weekly ritual when the miners were paid on a Saturday afternoon - 'the first thing the men did when they got the wage packet was to go to the pub. Half of it was spent there, in the pub, before they even got home ... what was left of

⁴⁷ Beddoe in *Out of the Shadows*, p. 89

⁴⁸ MWL archive no. 3414. Recorded 1972, available at:

https://museum.wales/welsh_womens_history/1_washing/ Accessed 4 August 2020

⁴⁹ Beatrice Wood 'Wednesday's Child' in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 130

⁵⁰ See Beddoe *Out of the Shadows*, p. 17, and Edith S. Davies 'The Innocent Years' in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 51

⁵¹ Beatrice Wood 'Wednesday's Child' in *Struggle or Starve*, Chapter 6, p. 130

the pay packet was then doled out to her: what *he* thought she ought to have'.⁵² Regardless of limited budgets, daily cooked breakfasts and a substantial evening meal were expected by the working man, even during strikes and lock outs, and again in households with several pitmen, this could be repeated up to three times a day. As one woman perhaps ruefully recalled 'years ago, we thought of the men first, didn't we? but the young ones now they're thinkin' of themselves. But the men was comin' first with us, always.'⁵³ In the hierarchy of coalfield society therefore, miners' wives placed the needs of their men, then their children before their own. Food was frequently scarce, and the poorest families would resort to scavenging, as a young Beatrice Wood recalls 'we used to go up to the market at closing time...we would pick up cabbage leaves...and damaged apples and oranges that had been thrown out....we had to be quick ...there were many other children like us.'⁵⁴ A recurrent theme is that of the wife who went without, assuring her husband that she had already eaten or would 'have something later', to ensure her family was fed; even so by the 1930s severely impoverished families such as Beatrice Wood's would refer to Thursdays as 'the day we called starvation day – we had nothing in the house.'⁵⁵ Surprisingly, Edith S. Davies remarked somewhat ironically 'with washing, ironing, cooking, and cleaning, together with caring for the children, a miner's wife too worked incredibly hard. Yet I never remember my mother or any of her married friends complaining that they were 'shattered' or 'bored', common complaints today'.⁵⁶ Known as 'tidy' women, it was this sense of pride and satisfaction in managing and providing, which contributed in part to the mythology of the 'Welsh Mam', of whom Beddoe writes 'now, she is a figure of the past.....she has slipped into history'.⁵⁷

⁵² Mildred Evans in *Growing up in Wales 1895-1939*, (1996), Jeffrey Grenfell-Hill (ed.), Gomer Press, Llandysul, p. 165.

⁵³ Rosemary Crook 'Tidy Women: Women in the Rhondda between the Wars', p. 45

⁵⁴ Beatrice Wood 'Wednesday's Child' in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 133

⁵⁵ Beatrice Wood 'Wednesday's Child' in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 132

⁵⁶ Edith S. Davies 'The Innocent Years' in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 56

⁵⁷ Beddoe, 'Munitionettes, Maids and Mams: Women in Wales 1914-1939, p. 203

Chapter 4. Health and Mortality

‘Death was becoming the accepted thing in our society – sort of here today and gone tomorrow.....The only people who were making money were the undertakers.’⁵⁸

Many memoirs display a remarkable insouciance about death, perhaps understandable in a society where pit accidents, pneumoconiosis, infant and maternal deaths, suicides, and a range of epidemic diseases, particularly tuberculosis, took a heavy toll. In several memoirs, children exhibit an almost morbid fascination with the rituals surrounding death, including the tradition of laying out the corpse in the front room. For valley women, the dangers inherent in poverty and disease were exacerbated by the tradition for large families, which only began to decline (slowly) post 1918. In a ground-breaking survey for the Women’s Co-operative Guild in 1915, working-class women from across industrial Britain related their experience of pregnancy, childbirth and raising families. The responses, moving and often graphic, revealed that out of 386 respondents, ‘348 have had 1,396 live children, 83 still births, and 218 miscarriages’.⁵⁹ Beddoe calculated that based on these figures ‘women at the turn of the century spent an *average* of fifteen years in childbearing and nursing, compared to four years in the period after the Second World War’,⁶⁰ and ten or more children were not uncommon. An undoubted biproduct of the doctrine of separate spheres was the failure to recognise the criticality of maternal nutrition and health to the alarmingly high infant mortality rates of the early twentieth century. In terms which have echoes of the notorious Blue Books, blame was firmly attributed to ‘the fecklessness and ignorance of working-class mothers in matters of nutrition and hygiene’,⁶¹ and housing conditions. Yet, although one school inspector highlighted extreme poverty as the cause of

⁵⁸ Beatrice Wood, ‘Wednesday’s Child’ in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 153

⁵⁹ Margaret Llewellyn Davies in *No One but a Women Knows*, (first published as *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*, (2012 [1978] [1915], Virago Press, p. xix

⁶⁰ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 20

⁶¹ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 21

significant numbers of children being inadequately clothed and poorly shod,⁶² there was no assessment of their general health. Conversely, maternal mortality rates continued to rise, notably between 1918 and 1939 as Beddoe wrote 'it was a major cause for alarm that in the highly industrial counties of Glamorgan and Monmouth.....the maternal mortality rates for 1929-33 showed an increase over the period 1924-8 of 14.2 per cent for Glamorgan and 42 percent for Monmouth.'⁶³ Several reports had highlighted the issue of hygiene standards obtaining in both qualified and unqualified birth attendants as a significant factor in maternal and infant mortality, with one asserting that most cases of maternal death were 'well within the range of preventive medicine.'⁶⁴ Maternal health weakened by poor nutrition and the heavy domestic workload, was Beddoe argued, clear to the medical authorities, but 'they refused to admit that there was any link between poverty and maternal deaths. To have conceded this, would have been to admit that Welsh women were dying of malnutrition.'⁶⁵

Birth rates fell in industrial South Wales, for example by 53.7 per cent in the Rhondda UDC between 1911-31,⁶⁶ but despite the recommendations in the Maternity and Child Welfare Act of 1918, obstetric and ante-natal care was patchy or non-existent in practice. A Maternity Benefit was paid directly to mothers from 1913 after campaigning by the Women's Co-operative Guild, yet despite this, most women struggled to afford the fees for a doctor or midwife to attend childbirth which was generally at home, and continued to rely upon the services of local unqualified 'handy' women. Many women responding to Llewellyn Davies, reported that they would, of necessity, be undertaking some domestic duties within days of childbirth, although it was common practice to use a local teenage girl to assist with managing the household and family for a short time. Despite their travails, the issue of birth control remained taboo for many, and provoked widespread hostility in some areas.

⁶² See The Cardiff Times and South Wales Weekly News 7 May 1910, available at: <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3415917/3415924/178/infant%20mortality%20south%20wales%20coalfields> accessed 31 July 2020

⁶³ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, pp. 93-4

⁶⁴ The Cambrian News and Merionethshire Standard 29 October 1915, available at : <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3413007/3413013/71/maternal%20mortality%20south%20wales%20coalfields> Accessed 31 July 2020

⁶⁵ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 94

⁶⁶ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 94

Whilst it was recognised that action was needed to reduce maternal mortality, and central government had finally approved the provision of birth control advice by 1930, for many impoverished local authorities the cost of establishing clinics was prohibitive. Opposition, especially in the hard-hit South Wales coalfield area, came largely from religious groups – Roman Catholics, some Non-Conformists, and significantly, recalcitrant health officials. Political opinion was mixed, Fisher argues that ‘socialist councils could probably not be relied upon to support birth control any more than Tory or Liberal ones’.⁶⁷ Labour, despite paying lip service to social reform ‘had a tendency to distrust Malthusian doctrines which saw ‘poverty as caused by overpopulation and ... advocated birth control as a population control measure’.⁶⁸ Furthermore, as Fisher suggested, Labour support for the campaign was often determined by political pragmatism – the vulnerable Catholic vote - and class prejudices.

There was, however, a growing demand amongst working-class women for access to birth control measures. Llewellyn Davies records a catalogue of the pernicious and often horrific physical effects of continual pregnancies, especially for older mothers. Maggie Pryce Jones recalled her mother’s unspoken fear of pregnancy after a harrowing and long drawn out recovery from the previous delivery not two years before - ‘at that moment I hated my father with all my heart – now I could see how selfish he really was’.⁶⁹ Likewise, Mair E. McLellan relived her fear at nine years old, hearing her mother’s bitter recriminations against her father, with yet another pregnancy when approaching middle age.⁷⁰ Her mother’s unsuccessful attempt to abort the baby and depression, sparked fear that she would take her own life, a not infrequent occurrence amongst desperate coalfield women. With fear of ‘one more mouth to feed’, the use of abortifacients as well as illegal abortions was well known and according to Wood often had fatal consequences.⁷¹ Pryce Jones’s mother, suffering from severe anaemia and inevitably malnutrition, but unable to afford medical treatment, died seven weeks after the birth of her baby at thirty-nine years

⁶⁷ Kate Fisher, ‘Clearing up misconception: the campaign to set up Birth Control Clinics in South Wales between the Wars’ in *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 19, 1 June 1998. P. 126

⁶⁸ Fisher, p. 126

⁶⁹ Maggie Pryce Jones ‘Kingfisher of Hope’ in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 158

⁷⁰ Mair E. McLellan ‘Shadows on the Wall’ in *Struggle or Starve*, pp. 227-231

⁷¹ Beatrice Wood, ‘Wednesday’s Child’ in *Struggle or Starve*, pp. 152-3

old. McLlellan's mother survived, yet the emotional impact upon her daughter had a long-lasting effect. Several of Llewellyn Davies's correspondents sadly recall that the physical damage to the body of repeated pregnancies was often compounded by male (and female) ignorance - 'some have suffered severe attacks of haemorrhage cause by sexual intercourse soon after birth.'⁷² Worse, one poor woman who complains that 'as soon as the birth is over, she is tortured again a man has such a lot of ways of punishing a woman if she does not give in to him.'⁷³

Whilst this may be an extreme case, Bruley argues that 'the South Wales Coalfield was a deeply patriarchal society, based on the idea of the miner as the breadwinner supporting a full-time wife and dependent children. In return, the wife serviced the husband's needs, which were very great. The foundation of marriage was a labour contract.'⁷⁴ With this principle in mind, it is clear that birth control was seen as a women's issue which would allow women to assert some agency over their own health and well-being, and as Graves suggests 'may have threatened Labour man's domestic and sexual authority'.⁷⁵ It is against this background that issues such as education, work and women's increased political awareness will be examined.

⁷² Llewellyn Davies *No One But a Woman knows*, pp. 26-27

⁷³ Llewellyn Davies p. 39

⁷⁴ Sue Bruley, 'Gender and Family' in *The Men and Women of 1926: A Gender and Social History of the General Strike and Miners Lockout in South Wales*, chapter 2, p. 22.

⁷⁵ Pamela Graves cited in Fisher, K. 'Clearing up misconception: the campaign to set up Birth Control Clinics in South Wales between the Wars', p. 127

Chapter 5. Breaking the Chains

'I would not have wanted my Mam's life. The women were all browbeaten by the men. The man was boss..... Mam had no opinions of her own, and if she *did*, it wasn't acknowledged: it was as if she had no influence whatsoever.'⁷⁶

A stark reminder of the true status of valley women in the early twentieth century, the undoubted rulers of the domestic sphere, but women were invisible outside the confines of her home, deferring to her husband in all matters. Nor, with the constant physical demands placed upon her, did she display much sentimentality towards her children. It was generally the mother who was seen as the disciplinarian and stern moralist, and Bruley argues that this 'emotional thrift' was 'had special resonance for women in South Wales.'⁷⁷ Many women recall close, affectionate relationships with their fathers, yet learnt to accept the 'emotional thrift' displayed by their mothers, as demonstrated by Mair E. McLellan's description of her reaction to her mother's distress 'I longed to go to her, to try to comfort her, but just as she showed me no outward signs of affection, I could not show her any, except by listening.'⁷⁸ Arguably it is possible to ascribe such emotional detachment to the toll which valley life took upon these women, indeed many of the letters written to Llewellyn Davies reveal a remarkable pragmatism and acceptance of the hardships and loss of children during pregnancy and infancy.

Education became the key to escaping the confines of their mother's lives. Maggie Pryce Jones commented on her mother's deference to her father's views, even being instructed how to vote. She wrote bitterly of her mother's shame of her illiteracy, and her shock at her grandmother's reaction 'a woman does not need to read or write. Our work is in the home, the men see to all else, and that is how it should be,' – I knew that it did matter. The incident stayed in my mind, fostering a deep rebellion inside me.'⁷⁹ Elementary education became compulsory up to the age of fourteen in

⁷⁶ Mildred Evans in *Growing up in Wales 1895-1939*, p. 170

⁷⁷ Bruley, 'Gender and Family', chapter 2, p. 26

⁷⁸ Mair E. McLellan, 'Shadows on the Wall' in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 227

⁷⁹ Maggie Pryce Jones 'Chrysanthemum is Hard to Spell' in *Struggle or Starve*, pp. 313-4

1918, and many memoirs recall bleak, utilitarian school buildings and the often harsh discipline imposed by (mainly) spinster teachers. Edith S. Davies wrote of her schooldays 'there are very few moments I can recall when learning was fun and something to be enjoyed ... There was a tendency for these excellent maiden ladies to take their work and themselves too seriously.'⁸⁰ However, she herself benefited from the ambition of a mother who firmly believed in equal opportunities for her daughters, and went on to read English at Cardiff University, and eventually to teach.

Not all parents were so farsighted, and a heavy emphasis was placed on domestic subjects, seen as a more appropriate preparation for life as a future homemaker or domestic servant. Pryce Jones was one more fortunate 'thanks to Mam and Dad's progressive attitude I was given every encouragement to work hard and, if necessary, to leave the valley to find a better future,'⁸¹ by winning a scholarship to the local Grammar School. Yet for the parents of many girls, the extracurricular costs of uniforms, books and travel were prohibitive. Maggie Pryce Jones's mother borrowed money to purchase her uniform, 'although she had to slave for months to pay off the club, I know she thought it worthwhile'.⁸² Similarly, Edith S. Davies's family made great sacrifices to see her through higher education, including for a while sharing a single pair of shoes with her mother, to enable her to attend her lectures.⁸³ Sadly, where money was scarce, many parents prioritised their sons over daughters, thus when Pryce Jones's mother died, she was forced to withdraw from Grammar School, despite her academic prowess, and assume her mother's domestic responsibilities, enabling her older brother to attend university.

Post war, government solutions for the crisis of female unemployment focussed on the euphemistically described 'Homemaker Courses', aimed at producing the next generation of wives and mothers, rather than preparing for employment, which was generally considered a stopgap between school and marriage. In the 1911 census almost 85,000 women and girls were employed as domestic servants,⁸⁴ the largest female occupational group. By 1931, it was nearly 100,000, although, thousands of

⁸⁰ Edith S. Davies, 'Thou shalt not wed', in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 244

⁸¹ Maggie Pryce Jones 'Kingfisher of Hope' in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 127

⁸² Maggie Pryce Jones 'Kingfisher of Hope' in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 127.

⁸³ See appendix in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 317

⁸⁴ GB Historical GIS/University of Portsmouth, Wales Dep through time/Industry Statistics/Persons of Working Age by Sex and 1911 Occupational Order, *A Vision of Britain through Time*.

young valley girls had been forced to migrate to England, particularly the London area to obtain employment. In the same census, women in the professions – mostly teachers or nurses – barely numbered 23,000. The most startling statistic is the number of women officially recorded as ‘retired or not gainfully employed’ which in the 1931 census stood at 773, 655,⁸⁵ effectively disregarding the countless wives, mothers and daughters categorised as ‘homemakers,’ many of whom would also be engaged in the hidden economy, described in many memoirs, involving work, often outside the home, such as cleaning, washing, wall-papering or sewing to supplement a precarious family income.

Bruley argues that the First World War generated an ‘unprecedented unsettling of established gender conventions’,⁸⁶ evidence of which can be seen in several memoirs. Throughout the conflict, women successfully took on a myriad of traditional male roles, earning a male wage, yet predictably when war ended, they were expected, especially if married, to return to their ‘natural’ roles as wives and mothers, with a considerable backlash in some areas from different interest groups, against working women who were deemed to be ‘stealing’ jobs from fighting men returning home. Despite landmark legislation, female enfranchisement, in 1918 and 1928, and the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act in 1919, women were still denied entry to the professions in practice, and the marriage bar was widespread into the 1930s. Clearly progress was limited.

Female employment levels dropped dramatically post war, to around 12.5 percent in the Rhondda in 1921,⁸⁷ leaving women even more marginalised in the public sphere. Yet the War, and the freedoms experienced, had inspired a political awareness amongst working-class women. Early activists in the Labour movement (mainly middle-class), had been criticised for ‘having come out of sympathy, and not out of a real experience of the working woman’s needs and struggles’,⁸⁸ and although represented in local government from the 1880s, it could be argued that it was not until the 1920s that working class women began to demonstrate a similar

⁸⁵ As above 1931

⁸⁶ Bruley, ‘Gender and Family’, chapter 2, p.17

⁸⁷ Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, p. 78

⁸⁸ *The Rhondda Socialist, Women in the Labour Movement*, 21 December 1912 in *The Very Salt of Life*, (2007), Jane Aaron and Ursula Masson, (eds.), Honno Classics, Dinas Powys, Part 3, 19, P. 231

'sense of collectivism and class consciousness'⁸⁹ seen amongst the miners, which gave them a voice. Spurred on by the suffrage movement, and the rising dominance of the Labour Party, many working-class women became active, generally in the Women's Co-operative Guild, or in the Women's Sections of the Labour Party, but also in local government. As Bruley commented 'most men, even active socialists, resented the idea of women's active participation in politics' although 'labour women adopted a maternalist brand of politics that did not pose any challenge to the gender basis of society, butaimed at highlighting the plight of working-class wives and mothers and making life easier for them.'⁹⁰

Of the women whose lives have been sampled, the most prominent was Elizabeth Andrews, who grew up in a mining family of eleven in the Rhondda, and left school at thirteen to train as a dressmaker due to her parent's straitened circumstances, despite her ambition to teach. Strongly motivated by her 'radical' father, her vivid childhood memories and deeply religious, her socialist activism was initiated through her marriage to Thomas Andrews, the First Secretary of the ILP. She became active in the Suffragist campaign, First Secretary of the Rhondda branch of the Women's Co-operative Guild in 1914, and in 1919 the first Women's Organiser for the Labour Party in Wales, a post she held until 1948, although as she remarked 'Rhondda those days was not very safe days for Socialists or Suffragettes'.⁹¹ Most significantly she was one of three miners wives reporting to the Sankey Commission on the mining industry in 1919, specifically on the issue of pit-head baths, their impact for the health of miners wives, and housing. Later a magistrate, she campaigned on maternity and child welfare and education, and was deeply involved in supporting mining families during the General Strike and Lock-out of 1926. Activists such as Andrews were unusual in that they were unafraid to challenge the patriarchal norms which were embedded even within the Labour Party. However, the majority of women party members were married women who chose to work within the Women's Sections because 'it was clear from the start that men and women would be treated

⁸⁹ Bruley, 'Gender and Family'. Chapter 2, p. 21

⁹⁰ Bruley, Chapter 5, p.91

⁹¹ Elizabeth Andrews, chapter 2, p. 16

differently and that women were wives and mothers first,⁹² something which Andrews does not choose to engage with in her autobiography.

The lives of others played out on a much smaller stage. Maggie Pryce Jones whose grammar school career was cut short by economic necessity, found work in the local Pit Canteen during World War Two, where she imbibed and developed a keen interest in socialism. Returning to formal education after raising her children, she joined the Civil Service, becoming an active trade unionist. Beatrice Wood too, after a short spell in domestic service, followed by a period of 'homework' supplied by the Quakers whilst dodging the hated Means Test Man, eventually found work in factories. Mair E. McLellan was perhaps the most poignant case, being deprived a formal education due to chronic ill-health, yet became an ardent reader with an enquiring mind. Inspired by her left wing father's eclectic book collection and journals such as the *Daily Worker* and *Communist Weekly*, she developed radical political views 'much further to the left'⁹³ than the Labour Movement, eventually joining the Young Communist League. Although she perhaps saw activism as an opportunity to socialise as much as a political campaign group, McLellan had clearly egalitarian views of the society she wished to enable. Interestingly, Bruley describes the Communist Party as numerically small but highly active in the coalfields and although 'committed to sexual equality.....in practice it was highly gendered,'⁹⁴ suggesting the scale of the challenge which women faced to overcome ingrained cultural prejudices.

⁹² Bruley, Chapter 5, p.87

⁹³ Mair E. McLellan, in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 306

⁹⁴ Bruley, Chapter 5, p. 92

Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation has been to open a window into the lives of working-class women in the South Wales coalfield in the early twentieth century, and to trace the early development of their journey towards socio-economic equality. Research for this dissertation has made it clear, as other commentators have said, that there is so much more to explore, and it has been necessary to be selective with areas for discussion. Consequently, subjects such as the significance of the Welsh language and culture, and women's involvement in industrial disputes have barely been touched upon. However, using the voices of the women who grew up there, whether written or oral, has provided the opportunity to give witness to their lives.

It has been seen that industrialisation proved to be a double-edged sword for women in the coalfields. In a volatile economic environment, largely excluded from gainful employment, most women became confined to their small, cramped, and substandard housing, enslaved by the perpetuation of patriarchal tradition. Rising to the challenges of war and a catastrophic depression, women were faced with the necessity to 'struggle or starve'. The doctrine of separate spheres as Beddoe said extended across all aspects of life in the coalfield, from employment, housing, domestic life, health, education, and family dynamics. The extent to which Non-Conformism influenced societal ideas has not been examined, but clearly the image of the 'angel in the home', exerted a powerful influence.

Education became the mantra for those women who envisaged a more equitable society, and they were clearly politicised by both their social and physical environment. Engaging with activism became a vehicle to educate women for life in the public realm, especially in times of social and economic unrest such as the General Strike and the Lockout of 1926, as Bruley commented 'many women from the mining community really developed as speakers, activists and leaders of their communities during the Lockout.'⁹⁵ It is perhaps significant that all three women whose lives we explored, were able to fulfil their ambitions to write, in stories and poetry, and to memorialise their histories to enlighten future generations. For Maggie Pryce Jones, she wrote 'I vowed that any children I might have would be

⁹⁵ Bruley, Chapter 5, p. 100

treated equally, whatever their sex, and more, I would see that they would have the best possible education.'⁹⁶

Finally, it has been seen that coalfield women created a unique identity for themselves, with an inner strength which allowed them and their families to survive economic adversity and initiate the cultural changes which forged ahead after 1939. Then, as has been said 'they demanded and got, the chains removed.'⁹⁷

7,121 words

⁹⁶ Maggie Pryce Jones in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 314

⁹⁷ Maggie Pryce Jones in *Struggle or Starve*, p. 311

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