

EMA for A329: The Making of Welsh History

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**To What Extent Did Independent Working-Class
Institutions Contribute to Working-Class Culture
in the Rhondda Valleys 1900-1945?**

BA (Hons) History

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Abbreviations

BBFC	British Board of Film Classification
CLC	Central Labour College
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
MFGB	Miners Federation of Great Britain
MP	Member of Parliament
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
PFI	Progressive Film Institute
RUDC	Rhondda Urban District Council
SWMF	South Wales Miners Federation

Introduction

The history of the Rhondda valleys in the first half of the twentieth century is inextricably tied to the development of the traditions of the labour movement in the area. The culture that gave rise to this has been the subject of extensive historical enquiry. In the context of this and broader debate around the nature of coalfield culture more generally the extent to which an alternative culture with its own sets of norms and values existed has been an ongoing debate in academia. In the contemporary context of the decline of organised labour, the marginalisation of social democratic political parties across Europe and the soul searching which surrounds the current trends of the UK Labour Party there is renewed interest in the cultures that fostered the political identities which gave birth to the labour movement.

The period 1900 – 1945 begins in the year of the election of the first Labour MPs. It covers up to the parties first parliamentary majority in 1945 and as such covers the bulk of the growth in class-based parliamentary politics. Away from electoralism, the period also covers the 1926 general strike, a high point in extra-parliamentary working-class struggle. As well as the Spanish Civil War, which some historians have argued marked a high-water mark for working class 'internationalism'. Within the communities of the Rhondda valleys a rich network of collectively organised independent working-class institutions contributed an alternative provision of services within a rich cultural tradition. The local experience of all these events was facilitated by the independent working-class institutions of the valleys. Whilst the stories of the high-profile battles of the period have been extensively covered by historians, it is in the day-to-day role of these institutions within their communities that their true impact can be found. This dissertation will analyse the role of these institutions in the creation and reproduction of culture within the Rhondda valleys.

The earliest histories of the coalfield were written by historians like Page Arnot, a founding member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and Ness Edwards, trade unionist and Labour Party MP. Their institutional histories of the development of the trade union movement in South Wales emphasized the struggle of the miners within the workplace. The pre-eminence of deterministic strains of marxism in the period gave birth to a linear historical narrative of class conflict and the perceived inevitable march of labour through history. Hywel Francis and David Smith's 1980 book 'The Fed: A History of The South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century'¹, commissioned by the NUM, sought to expand these horizons. It followed on from the works of Arnot² and sought to place the SWMF in its cultural context with a study of the union 'in its society'. However, the contradictions of

¹ Francis, H. and Smith, D (1980) *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, London, Lawrence and Wishart

² Arnot, P. (1949) *The Miners: A History of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, 1889-1910*. London, Allen and Unwin. And Arnot, P. (1953) *The Miners: A History of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain from 1910 onwards, Years of Struggle*, London, Unwin Brothers Ltd

writing an institutional history of the SWMF as a social history of the coalfield were acknowledged in the preface to the book where they lamented that the book had not become the 'complete, well rounded social history of South Wales' they had intended³. Rather, through its heavy focus on the SWMF it ultimately still served primarily as a history of the union at the expense of an in-depth analysis of the society from which it emerged. The book asserted a contentious view that an 'alternative culture' based on 'class discipline, resourceful quasi-political illegality, direct action' and 'collectivist action' had emerged by 1926⁴. This narrative continues in scholarship by both Francis and Smith, most notably Smith's collection 'A People and a Proletariat'⁵ published in the same year and Francis' 'Miners Against Fascism' in 1984⁶. It remained a dominant theme in labour histories treatment of the area and featured prominently in contemporary articles in the Welsh labour history Journal *Llafur*.

In the wake of the defeat of the 1984 miners' strike and the fall of the Soviet Union, many of the certainties of this approach to history had been turned upside down by the 1990s. Within this atmosphere there was a flurry of more critical works. John Williams essay collection 'Was Wales Industrialised?' challenged established narratives about the industrialisation of Wales⁷. This new approach often took the form of disputing the extent to which an adversarial culture existed rather than a full-frontal attack on the concept. This work is extremely useful to judgements on the reality of working-class culture in the valleys and the role of the different institutions in it. In Alan Burges article 'In Search of Harry Blount: Scabbing Between the Wars in One South Wales Community' he described 'scabs' as being ostracised from Conservative clubs (albeit this was not in the Rhondda valleys)⁸. The presence of Conservative clubs disrupts the narrative of a universally class-conscious politicised population. However, through the ostracization of scabs within the conservative clubs, it reinforces and complicates discussions around the cultural hegemony of collectivist values. The strong labour history tradition underwent a transformation which gave rise to a series of more nuanced works such as those of Chris Williams, who sympathetically explored the culture of the valleys in a new and more critical light⁹. Another development of the period was the development of comparative pieces which placed the valleys in the context of international coalfields. These shone a light on what was unique about the area in its

³ Francis, H. and Smith, D (1980) *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, London, Lawrence and Wishart. pXV

⁴ Francis, H. and Smith, D (1980) *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, London, Lawrence and Wishart. Pp 54-56

⁵ Smith, D. (Ed.) (1980) *A People and A Proletariat: Essays In The History of Wales 1780-1980*, London, Pluto Press

⁶ Francis, H. (1984) *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and The Spanish Civil War*, London, Lawrence and Wishart

⁷ Williams, J (1995) *Was Wales Industrialised? Essays in Modern Welsh History*, Llandysul, Gomer Press

⁸ Burge, A. (1994) 'In Search of Harry Blount: Scabbing Between the Wars in One South Wales Community', *Llafur*, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 58 – 69. P66. [Online]

⁹ Williams, C. (1996) *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society 1885 – 1951*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press and Williams, C. (1998) *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield 1898-1947*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press

development and culture in comparisons with West Virginia and the Ruhr among others¹⁰. This is an area still relatively underexplored with a multitude of avenues for comparison remaining.

The first chapter of this dissertation addresses the nature of working-class culture in the Rhondda valleys. It achieves this by exploring the contributions of historians, sociologists, and political economists to the debate around coalfield culture. It charts the conflicting narratives around coalfield culture and places the peculiarities of the Rhondda valleys within them. It attempts to separate the created traditions from the reality of valleys life. It creates an image of working-class culture that can be used to analyse the independent working-class institutions.

The second chapter explores what an independent-working class institution was in the first half of the twentieth century. It uses case studies of independent working-class education and the provision of leisure activities by the institutes. It also explores the miners' libraries which straddled the world of both education and leisure. In doing so, it analyses to what extent these institutions offered an alternative to services available municipally or commercially and whether they did so through their organisational forms or the type of services they were providing. Finally, the chapter seeks to answer what the impact of this was for working-class culture in the Rhondda valleys.

¹⁰ Fagge, R. (1996) *Power, Culture and Conflict in the Coalfields: West Virginia and South Wales, 1900 – 22*, Manchester, Manchester University Press. And Berger, S. (2001) 'Working-Class Culture and The Labour Movement in The South Wales and Ruhr Coalfields, 1850-2000 A Comparison', *Llafur*, Vol. 8, No. 2. Pp. 5-40 [Online].

Chapter 1

'Bastard Children of Imperial Wales'¹¹:

An Alternative Culture?

The idea of an alternative culture in coal mining communities with coal miners as the 'archetypal proletarian' has been created and applied to various coal mining communities historically around the world. In the case of Rhondda it found a place in the historiographical debate around the South Wales coalfield as one of the storm centres of British industrial conflict and class politics in the first half of the twentieth century. This image was sustained in the popular imagination by the continuing role of the coal miners as the shock troops of the trade union movement. In this context, the adversarial narrative of Welsh history so integral to the historiography of the Rhondda valleys was born.

The histories of Page Arnot and Ness Edwards emphasised the economic and physical conditions of the miners¹². In this narrative, trade unionism and the battles to improve pay and conditions were the natural consequence of the economic and physical conditions of the coalfield. This was representative of trends towards determinism in inter-war British marxism as identified by Stuart Macintyre¹³. Determinism around coal miners militancy was given sociological form by Kerr and Siegel in their 1954 essay¹⁴. They presented the idea that high levels of militancy were the product of geographically isolated communities engaged in unpleasant and dangerous work. They argued this gave rise to homogenous communities locked in adversarial relationships with employers or an 'isolated mass'.

Kerr and Siegel's hypothesis sparked debate around its applicability to different groups of workers. This was critiqued by Rimlinger who noted the hypothesis' inability to account for the differences between workers across four case studies with similar material conditions¹⁵. Historical investigation was slower to arise. E.P. Thompson's 1963 publication 'The Making of the English Working Class' was a seminal moment, which began to explore the influence of localised cultures on class development and inspired an increased exploration of 'history from below'¹⁶. Similarly, Royden Harrison's 1978 collection¹⁷ was a landmark in coalfield history. The book echoed the critiques of the earlier sociologists, that regional cultural variations could produce dramatically different outcomes, but importantly it introduced an

¹¹ Williams, G. (1985) *When Was Wales?*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, p. 241.

¹² Edwards, N. (1926) *The History of The South Wales Miners*, London, Labour Pub. Co.

¹³ Macintyre, S. (1980) *A Proletarian Science: Marxism In Britain, 1917-1933*, London, Lawrence and Wishart

¹⁴ C. Kerr. And A. Siegel. (1954) 'The Inter-Industry Propensity to Strike: An International Comparison', in Kornhauser, A. Dubin, R. and Ross, A. (1954) *Industrial Conflict*, New York, McGraw Hill. Pp193-194

¹⁵ Rimlinger, G. (1959) 'International Differences in the Strike Propensity of Coal Miners: Experience in Four Countries', *Industrial & labor relations review*, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 389–405. [Online]

¹⁶ Thompson, E. P. (1963). *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, Penguin Books.

¹⁷ Harrison, R (Ed.) (1978) *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered*, New York, St Martin's Press

argument that individuals would engage in collective struggle motivated primarily by individual gain from it.

In this academic context and the aftermath of the victorious labour unrest of 1970-74, Hywel Francis and David Smith wrote 'The Fed'. It was commissioned by the National Union of Mineworkers to follow on from Page Arnot's institutional history of the MFGB. In this book, the idea of an 'alternative culture' in the South Wales coalfield where 'social, political and cultural norms were being increasingly rejected'¹⁸ was presented as driving coalfield militancy. Francis built upon this narrative in later works to include ideas of 'internationalism' and popular anti-fascism¹⁹. Francis' and Smiths' characterisation of the culture of the coalfield is widely acknowledged to be hyperbolic. Examples such as elusions to the Leninist principle of 'dual power'²⁰ when describing the situation in Mardy in 1925 and talk of 'guerrilla and open warfare'²¹ are huge departures from reality when held in comparison to the violent struggles of the Asturian miners or West Virginians. The book is possessed by, what Mike Lieven described as 'a Gramscian awareness that in writing history the historian is creating consciousness and identities which themselves make the future'²². This is vividly apparent in parts of their treatment of the culture of the valleys. However, the idea of an alternative culture, once divorced from the hyperbole is more difficult to dislodge and has persisted in historical debate. This is especially true of Rhondda, which played host to many of the localised characteristics used to justify a coalfield wide culture.

While Francis and Smith's narrative leans heavily on the presence of communism in the South Wales Coalfield, Chris Williams observation that Labourism and gradual reform were a far more common iteration of class politics²³. The outsizing of the communist role can often be due to the adeptness of the cadres of the Communists in extra-parliamentary organisation but also due to their over-representation in the coalfield's noisier circles. The presentation of the Labour Party as the status quo position of the working class in contrast to a CPGB can be an inaccurate characterisation. In the first half of the twentieth century the idea of working-class self-representation was novel in its own right and the Labour Party still fought close won battles in many industrial seats around the country. There also existed large traditions of working-class Toryism in cities such as Liverpool²⁴. The conservative tradition in the valleys was minuscule but resilient, it even managed to maintain a

¹⁸ Francis, H. and Smith, D (1980) *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, London, Lawrence and Wishart p54

¹⁹ Francis, H. (1984) *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and The Spanish Civil War*, London, Lawrence and Wishart

²⁰ Francis, H. and Smith, D (1980) *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, London, Lawrence and Wishart p55

²¹ Francis, H. and Smith, D (1980) *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, London, Lawrence and Wishart p56

²² Lieven, M. (2002) 'A New history of the South Wales Coalfield?', *Llafur*, Vol.8, No. 3. P91 [Online]

²³ Williams, C. (1998) *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield 1898-194*, Cardiff University of Wales Press. P5

²⁴ Jeffery, D. (2017), "The strange death of Tory Liverpool: Conservative electoral decline in Liverpool, 1945–1996", *British Politics*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 386-407. [Online]

Conservative club in Mardy's 'Little Moscow'²⁵. In Rhondda the existence of popular communism cannot be disregarded either. The CPGB performed well electorally in the valleys; the CPGB vote in Rhondda East grew consistently from 15.2 percent of the popular vote in 1929 to 45.5 percent in the 1945 election; less than a thousand votes short of the Labour candidate. Equally, party membership although low as a percentage of the population, was high in the South Wales district for its size in comparison to the constituent parties in other divisions²⁶. The Labour Party also did not achieve a mass membership in valleys, despite being one of the redoubts of the party when it was wiped out in the 1931 election, not a single constituency in Wales had over 1000 members in 1930²⁷.

The working-class ideal of 'respectability' is a vague and hard to pin down concept. It can relate to a whole manner of cultural peculiarities. O'Leary, when writing about the experience of Irish immigrants in South Wales characterised respectability as being about the separation of the public from the private; A desire to maintain the appearance of outward respectability regardless of the private reality. In this description, he included attitudes towards alcohol, church, gender roles and the virtue of work²⁸ as pillars of this. Dai Smith in his social history 'Aneurin Bevan and The World of South Wales' encapsulated the irrationality of this practice perfectly when he described the belief of the Welsh working class that they must 'wear the clothes of bourgeois' when in public²⁹. In the sociologist Savage's work on Preston 1880-1940 he observed whilst discussing working-class culture that:

People have a variety of beliefs about different elements of their lives, and there is no reason to suppose there is any coherence about these beliefs³⁰

This is useful to think about when considering the value of respectability in the context of the Rhondda Valleys. Robert Pope's suggestion of socialism as a moral prism to understand the world helps explain the juxtaposition of conservative attitudes on issues such as dress or the virtue of work alongside a willingness to engage in the type of violence that regularly characterised industrial disputes in the valleys³¹. Arthur Horner noted in his memoirs about the battle to overcome the miner's belief in the virtue of work and the social stigma around seeking relief from the Guardians during the great depression, they tried to frame it as 'a point of honour to demand support from a society which was denying us the right to a living

²⁵ Francis, H. and Smith, D (1980) *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, London, Lawrence and Wishart p160

²⁶ Table 4. In Macintyre, S. (1980) *A Proletarian Science: Marxism In Britain, 1917-1933*, London, Lawrence and Wishart p28

²⁷ Savage, M. (1987) *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston 1880-1940*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. P196

²⁸ O'Leary, P. (2005) 'Networking Respectability: Class, Gender and Ethnicity among the Irish in South Wales, 1845-1914', *Immigrants & Minorities*, Vol. 23, No.2-3, pp. 255-275 [Online]

²⁹ Smith, D. (1993), *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press p. 56

³⁰ Savage, M. (1987) *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston 1880-1940*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. P3

³¹ Pope, R. (1998) *Building Jerusalem: Nonconformity, Labour and the Social Question in Wales 1906-1939*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press. p107

wage³² This attempt to subordinate respectability to a collective moral code chimes with a number of other coexisting beliefs that are at surface level incoherent and suggest that some form of working-class collectivism was a part of this idea of respectability in South Wales. It is important to note that within this moral framework the ultimate contempt was reserved for 'scabs' who could be ostracised even by their own families for years as well as being turned away from recreational venues or being the victims of physical violence³³. The ultimate moral failure within this system being the failure to stand collectively with your community.

It is far from a controversial position to characterise Rhondda society as religious at the turn of the twentieth century. There is relative consensus amongst historians around the chapel as one of the centres of valleys communal life in the nineteenth century. However, the beginning of the twentieth century saw this decline. Chris Williams stated the need to 'beware of overestimating the cultural power and centrality of Welsh non-conformity, particularly as the new century developed' citing a 1910 royal commission report that observed religious attendance in the valleys was no longer filling the capacity of the chapels to provide it³⁴. This decline was mirrored by the rise of independent working-class institutions in the area over the same period. The persistence of the campaign by religious leaders to prevent miner's institutes from opening on a Sunday is indicative of the impact the spread of independent working-class institutions was having upon religious attendance. This campaign was conducted through the local authorities from 1909 onwards, a fight that the chapels ultimately lost in 1919 after a decade of defensive campaigning³⁵. It has been widely accepted by historians that by 1914 the chapel had been supplanted by some form of class expression as the centre of communal life. Robert Pope, reader in Theology at The University of Wales, has observed that 'the SWMF virtually replaced the social function of the chapel.'³⁶

Despite this decline, the chapels did remain a feature of society, this role was not seen by many contemporaries as incompatible with the more 'alternative' aspects of valleys culture. The memoirs of both Arthur Horner and Will Paynter recall their chapel attendance in their youth as a key part of their lives, both co-opting this with their identities as communists and trade unionists. In the communist activist turned author Lewis Jones' fictionalised account of valleys life, *Cwmardy/ We Live*, chapel attendance is part of the origin story of his proletarian protagonist³⁷ and Mark Starr, author of 'A Worker Looks at History' amongst other Plebs League publications, identified Sunday school as the root of his marxist

³² Horner, A (1960) *Incorrigible Rebel*, London, MacGibbon and Kee. P57

³³ Burge, A. (1994) 'In Search of Harry Blount: Scabbing Between the Wars in One South Wales Community', *Llafur*, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 58 – 69 [Online].

³⁴ Williams, C. (1996) *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society 1885 – 1951*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press p20

³⁵ Williams, C. (1996) *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society 1885 – 1951*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press p115

³⁶ Pope, R. (1998) *Building Jerusalem: Nonconformity, Labour and the Social Question in Wales 1906-1939*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press. p92

³⁷ Jones, L. (1937) *Cwmardy*, Llandysul, Gomer Press and Jones, L. (1939) *We Live*, Llandysul, Gomer Press

conviction³⁸. Additionally, like the concept of 'respectability' the church itself could be a source of alternative culture within the valleys. At varying times over the period chapels could be found preaching pacificism during the first world war³⁹, fundraising for the Spanish Civil War⁴⁰, involved with left-wing educational groups⁴¹ as well as a great many individual cases of clergy involvement in labour politics⁴².

Bargielowska citing Church in 1993 posited the idea that debate around the nature of coalfield culture was so persistent because we did not have 'a satisfactory explanation for miners' militancy'⁴³. This observation is still apt today, Rhondda in the first half of the twentieth century was an incredibly diverse place. An attempt to categorise this into one homogenous culture will always be difficult due to the variety of different contradictory outcomes thrown up by patterns of human behaviour and individual belief systems. However, amongst the confusing, often incoherent cultural markers of the Rhondda valleys there is a strong if sometimes contradictory attachment to collective ideals. The material conditions of the Rhondda valleys threw out a diverse range of political expression, in its dominant two forms these were differing versions of class consciousness, but conservatism maintained a small and resilient presence. The church, far from being swept away by 'scientific' marxism persisted in the valleys and was accepted as a part of life by even some of the most zealous followers of the new religion. All of these traditions and the rigid moral code of respectability were able to be subordinated to and incorporated into a wider inclusive collective identity within the valleys. Whereas the historian may look at many of these practices and values as at odds with one and another, it is the very ability of the collective identity to bridge these gaps which demonstrates its strength within the communities of the Rhondda.

³⁸ Transcription of a 1983 interview with Mark Starr in Martin, L. (1985) "Mark Starr: Socialist Educator" [interview with Mark Starr], *Llafur*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 91-96.

³⁹ Francis, H. and Smith, D (1980) *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, London, Lawrence and Wishart p10

⁴⁰ Francis, H. (1984) *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and The Spanish Civil War*, London, Lawrence and Wishart p35

⁴¹ Lewis, R. (1993) *Leaders and Teachers: Adult Education and the Challenges of Labour in South Wales 1906-1940*, Cardiff, University of Wales press. p95

⁴² Pope, R. (1998) *Building Jerusalem: Nonconformity, Labour and the Social Question in Wales 1906-1939*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press

⁴³ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, I. (1993), "Miners' Militancy: A Study of Four South Wales Collieries During the Middle of the Twentieth Century", *Welsh History Review*, vol. 16, no. 3, p357. [Online]

Chapter 2

A Design for Life?:

Collective Institutions and Culture in the

Rhondda Valleys

An independent working-class institution is an organisation that provides services on an independent basis collectively controlled and funded by working-class members. In the Rhondda valleys, it was possible at varying times between 1900 and 1945 to access most services required for everyday life through this type of alternative provision. These types of institutions dominated the South Wales coalfield. This is a defining characteristic of the area compared to other industrial regions where their development was marked by the struggle for state provision of services⁴⁴ or, in others with less turbulent industrial relations, a dependency upon the local petit-bourgeoisie or factory owners to provide⁴⁵. This unusual development would shape the nature of Rhondda society.

Rhondda's greatest collective endeavour was its network of variously named Miners Institutes. The construction of these was funded partly by collective means but they also benefited from donations by local colliery owners⁴⁶. After the initial construction, funding was typically a collective affair with money being raised from miners as members, in some areas there were also payments by 'outsiders', members of the community who were not miners. Although there were varying restrictions on whether these people could become members or not⁴⁷. The day to day running of these institutions was led by its members from that point forwards. In turn becoming independent and working-class in nature almost immediately once they had exhausted any capital provided for establishment.

The miners' libraries of the institutes peaked at providing twelve libraries in the Rhondda. This not only outstripped the municipal and philanthropic provision of its time but is larger than any provision of libraries in the valleys since⁴⁸. Hywel Francis characterised the libraries as a tool for historians to understand the 'growth of a political consciousness on a local

⁴⁴ Savage, M. (1987) *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston 1880-1940*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press p36

⁴⁵ Savage, M. (1987) *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston 1880-1940*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press p48

⁴⁶ Baggs, C. (1995) *The Miners' Libraries of South Wales from the 1860s to 1939*, PHD Thesis, Aberystwyth p210

⁴⁷ Baggs, C. (1995) *The Miners' Libraries of South Wales from the 1860s to 1939*, PHD Thesis, Aberystwyth p225

⁴⁸ Baggs, C. (2006) "Radical reading? Working-class libraries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," In Black, A. and Hoare, P. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 169–179. P175 [Online]

level' through local reading habits⁴⁹. Baggs' 1995 thesis gives an in-depth account of these. Fiction formed the largest single category in all but 2 of the library catalogues available⁵⁰. Although, in Baggs' system of categorising books fiction was a generic label in contrast to his breaking down of non-fiction books into various subsections. This meant that, although the dominant category, fiction books were still outnumbered by non-fiction in all of the records available for libraries in the Rhondda. In Ynshir 294 of 997 books were fiction, Mardy 219 of 2049 and even in libraries with higher than average percentages of fiction books non-fiction was larger with 2412 books out of 3469 in Cymmer⁵¹. Baggs noted that the rates are similar to those in public libraries where the average was 37 percent fiction⁵². This was expanded in an article where Baggs argued that borrowing figures in the libraries, where available, showed fiction made up over ninety percent of borrowing⁵³. Although a departure from Francis' depiction of the libraries as engines of political education, these patterns are predictable for a library lending primarily for leisure. Robert James in his exploration of working-class leisure in the 1930s identified the huge popularity of fiction reading⁵⁴. During the great depression Ynyshir loaned 85 books for every paying miner annually whilst catering for an additional 300 unemployed readers⁵⁵, the lending of large quantities of easily accessible fiction books suggests a community invested far beyond the politically engaged sections of society.

Many of the sources cited as evidence for high levels of political education amongst coal miners are anecdotes from individuals such as Reverend Barker who is quoted as saying his neighbours knew more about 'the writings of Karl Marx and the philosophy of Dietzgen than in any other working-class community in the country'⁵⁶. Assessment of such statements in light of Baggs' work serves as a reminder that you aren't required to have read something to 'know about' it. Unless the reverend was a scholar of Marx and Dietzgen himself it is difficult to say how well placed he would have been to pass judgement on this knowledge. What is clear from it is that the language of some form of popular marxism had entered into the lexicon of language and popular discourse. Mardy, for example, had a 'communist' football team⁵⁷. It is reasonable to assume the players would be aware of Marx's ideas whilst likely

⁴⁹ Francis, H. (1976) 'The Origins of the South Wales Miners' Library', *History workshop*, Vol. 2, pp. 183–205. [online]

⁵⁰ Baggs, C. (1995) *The Miners' Libraries of South Wales from the 1860s to 1939*, PHD Thesis, Aberystwyth p354

⁵¹ Table 19 in Baggs, C. (1995) *The Miners' Libraries of South Wales from the 1860s to 1939*, PHD Thesis, Aberystwyth p387

⁵² Baggs, C. (1995) *The Miners' Libraries of South Wales from the 1860s to 1939*, PHD Thesis, Aberystwyth p358

⁵³ Baggs, C. (2001). 'How Well Read Was My Valley?: Reading, Popular Fiction, and the Miners of South Wales, 1875-1939'. *Book History*, Vol. 4, p278. [Online]

⁵⁴ James, R. (2010) *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste in Britain, 1930-39: A Round of Cheap Diversions?*, Manchester, Manchester University Press. p25 [Online]

⁵⁵ Baggs, C. (1995) *The Miners' Libraries of South Wales from the 1860s to 1939*, PHD Thesis, Aberystwyth p404

⁵⁶ Baggs, C. (2001). 'How Well Read Was My Valley?: Reading, Popular Fiction, and the Miners of South Wales, 1875-1939'. *Book History*, Vol. 4, p289. [Online]

⁵⁷ Francis, H. and Smith, D (1980) *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, London, Lawrence and Wishart p161

had not all read his works. The availability of such literature alongside the more popular fiction also helped to spread ideas. Will Paynter's process of discovering marxism began with a general interest in reading. Before discovering political philosophy in the library, a process which may not have happened had the books been kept in some form of exclusively political library which one would have to seek out specifically⁵⁸.

Alongside the didactic tradition of the libraries, an independent provision of working-class adult education with its epicentre in the Rhondda developed in the first half of the twentieth century. The SWMF had long supported adult education through the Ruskin college, founded by Walter Vrooman, a philanthropist alongside Charles Beard. The college was in Oxford, without any official connection to the university, and it aimed to provide further education to working-class students⁵⁹. Ruskin ran initially through postal students with scholarships available to those who demonstrated ability. It was through this mechanism that the first students from the Rhondda valleys began to attend⁶⁰. Amongst these was Mardy Jones, who would later be instrumental in securing SWMF funding for scholarships. In 1906 the Rhondda No.1 District committee established two scholarships for miners to attend the college⁶¹. Relations at the college were frayed from the start and conflicts over conditions and ideology drove several grievances⁶². This culminated in marxist students forming the Plebs League following disputes relating to lecturers' perceived opposition to marxism⁶³. The Plebs launched their own publication in 1908 and the first issue featured an article by Ablett on the importance of independent working-class provision of education⁶⁴. In 1909 the 'Ruskin College Strike' occurred as a result of these tensions and the Central Labour College was established, funded by the SWMF and the National Union of Railwaymen⁶⁵. At the same time, branches of the Plebs League proliferated in the Rhondda establishing three branches by April 1909. By 1912 a full schedule of twenty lectures on marxian economics was being organised at five centres throughout the Rhondda, attracting attendances of up to 35 people⁶⁶. Jon Edwards one of the early teachers of these classes described how, owing to the unaffordability of academic books, a 'book club' was established where members paid in collectively to purchase

⁵⁸ Paynter, W (1972) *My Generation*, Plymouth, George Allen and Unwin p33

⁵⁹ Edwards, J. (1956) *From the Valley I Came*, London, Angus and Robertson p167

⁶⁰ Lewis, R. (1993) *Leaders and Teachers: Adult Education and the Challenges of Labour in South Wales 1906-1940*, Cardiff, University of Wales press. p49-51

⁶¹ Lewis, R. (1993) *Leaders and Teachers: Adult Education and the Challenges of Labour in South Wales 1906-1940*, Cardiff, University of Wales press. p54

⁶² Edwards, J. (1956) *From the Valley I Came*, London, Angus and Robertson, p184

⁶³ Edwards, J. (1956) *From the Valley I Came*, London, Angus and Robertson pp184

⁶⁴ Lewis, R. (1993) *Leaders and Teachers: Adult Education and the Challenges of Labour in South Wales 1906-1940*, Cardiff, University of Wales press p67

⁶⁵ Lewis, R. (1993) *Leaders and Teachers: Adult Education and the Challenges of Labour in South Wales 1906-1940*, Cardiff, University of Wales press p84

⁶⁶ Lewis, R. (1993) *Leaders and Teachers: Adult Education and the Challenges of Labour in South Wales 1906-1940*, Cardiff, University of Wales press p91

people's books in turn⁶⁷. The break from the Ruskin college and the establishment of the CLC was significant both rhetorically and in the development of independent working-class education. Provision of education even through collective institutions like the SWMF was, before 1909, always provided through external institutions beyond the control of the people using them. The Plebs and the Central Labour College represented a genuine alternative model to that of classical education which was organised funded and ran collectively by the working-class people who used it through a model of mutual help rather than charity.

Notably, these institutions produced an organic working-class intelligentsia of their own. The Plebs published works such as Mark Starr's 'A Worker Looks at History'⁶⁸ and study guides for marxian economics. The highpoint of this tradition was 'The Miners' Next Step' widely attributed to Noah Ablett, described by Chris Williams as 'the coalfields greatest organic intellectual'⁶⁹, but contributed to by multiple individuals. The document was a manifesto for syndicalist reform of the SWMF. Of the individuals named as contributing over half were from the Rhondda valleys and 21 of the 30 individuals had attended some form of working-class educational institution⁷⁰. David Lewis commented upon the obvious difficulty of proving the link between developments in the coalfield and the pedagogical traditions of organisations such as the Plebs⁷¹. Lewis pointed to the spread of the language of class struggle and marxism into the popular lexicon of the valleys as evidence of a process of osmosis through the educated workers' interactions in work and the community. In a 1912 column in the Rhondda Socialist Newspaper 'Matron', a regular female contributor, decrying the lack of female opportunities in the contemporary labour movement attributed the attendance of most men who attended the course upon 'the influence of one man upon another'. This suggests both societal pressures to attend education as well as social status for those who did⁷². Hywel Francis also touched upon a process whereby social interactions and influence fuelled the transmission of ideas⁷³. John Edwards, who himself taught evening classes, indicated this as the intention of the classes, as creating 'an army of class-conscious

⁶⁷ Edwards, J. (1956) *From the Valley I Came*, London, Angus and Robertson p211

⁶⁸ Starr, M. (1925) *A Worker Looks at History*, London, Plebs League

⁶⁹ Williams, C. (1996) *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society 1885 – 1951*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press p12

⁷⁰ Egan, D. (1978) 'The Unofficial Reform Committee and the Miners Next Step: Documents From the W. H. Mainwaring Papers, With an Introduction and Notes', *Llafur*, Vol. 2, No. 3 [online] p70

⁷¹ Lewis, R. (1993) *Leaders and Teachers: Adult Education and the Challenges of Labour in South Wales 1906-1940*, Cardiff, University of Wales press P80-81

⁷² Document XV in Williams, C. (1998) *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield 1898-194*, Cardiff University of Wales Press. p111

⁷³ Francis, H. (1984) *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and The Spanish Civil War*, London, Lawrence and Wishart p42

students capable, we believed, of spreading a gospel of revolutionary ideas throughout the coalfield'⁷⁴.

Partially driven by the need to diversify their revenue away from the boom-and-bust cycles of local coal employment institutes diversified into an extensive range of leisure activities. This process of expanding beyond the educational and political and into the provision of everyday services cemented the libraries status as centres of a collectively invested community. Institutes provided services and events as diverse as Christmas celebrations⁷⁵, billiards⁷⁶, bi-weekly dances⁷⁷ or even museums in the case of Porth, which maintained a small geology museum⁷⁸. Ferndale institute had a swimming pool from which they organised a water polo team⁷⁹ as did Llwynypia⁸⁰. Llwynypia baths doubled up as a boxing venue⁸¹, highlighted by E. D. Lewis as one of the centres of sport as a social spectacle in the valleys⁸². A full exploration of the sheer variety of leisure activities the institutes began to host is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, the significance of this is in the institute becoming a real community asset and the centre of life.

One of the most successful of these ventures was cinema. Cinema's popularity exploded following its initial introduction in South Wales with its weekly attendances outstripping football and rugby by 1946⁸³. Whilst large chains of cinemas flourished in parts of the UK, the geography of the Rhondda valleys made it a poor investment into that gap stepped the institutes as well as small scale commercial providers such as Will Stones' Tonypany Empire⁸⁴. At the time of the publication of the first Kinematographic Yearbook in 1914, the Rhondda valleys were listed as having ten cinemas, only two of which were attached to institutes; these cinemas were listed as belonging to the miners in the column regarding ownership⁸⁵. By 1929 the valleys had sixteen cinemas; nine of these were independent working-class institutions with the institutes ranks joined by a co-operative hall in Cymmer which also now hosted a cinema⁸⁶.

⁷⁴ Edwards, J. (1956) *From the Valley I Came*, London, Angus and Robertson p260

⁷⁵ *Rhondda Leader*, January 9th 1909

⁷⁶ *Western Mail*, May 31st 1913

⁷⁷ Francis, H. and Smith, D (1980) *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, London, Lawrence and Wishart p160.

⁷⁸ Lewis, E. (1975) 'Population Changes and Social Life' in Hopkins, K. (ed.) *Rhondda Past Future and Present*, Ferndale, Rhondda Borough Council p126

⁷⁹ *Rhondda Leader*, March 4th 1911

⁸⁰ *Evening Express*, September 20th 1909

⁸¹ *Rhondda Leader* February 1st 1919

⁸² Lewis, E. (1975) 'Population Changes and Social Life' in Hopkins, K. (ed.) *Rhondda Past Future and Present*, Ferndale, Rhondda Borough Council

⁸³ Miskell, P. (2000) *Pulpits, Coal pits and Fleapits: A Social History of the Cinema in Wales 1918-1951*, PHD Thesis, Aberystwyth. P12

⁸⁴ Miskell, P. (2000) *Pulpits, Coal pits and Fleapits: A Social History of the Cinema in Wales 1918-1951*, PHD Thesis, Aberystwyth. P21

⁸⁵ (1914) *The Kinematograph Yearbook Programme Diary and Directory 1914*, London, Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly

⁸⁶ (1929) *Kinematograph Yearbook 1929*,

The cinemas, more so than other pursuits offered by the institutes, were vehicles of mass entertainment and Hollywood films achieved massive working-class popularity⁸⁷ and dominated the listings⁸⁸. Though this sparked derision from some on the left, such as author Bert Coombes⁸⁹, the cinemas in places such as Treorchy and Pentre were in competition with commercial cinemas for audiences and income⁹⁰. Although it is accurate to characterise the institutes as offering much of the same film content as commercial cinemas, they did not shy away from venturing into alternatives. Their output could often be political or educational. The regulatory rules of the BBFC were not all-encompassing and local authorities could defy its rulings. In light of this, a worker's film federation⁹¹ was set up to screen banned Soviet films and Mardy institute in the Rhondda hosted some of its screenings, showing Pudowkin's 'Mother' in May 1931⁹¹. Ivor Montagu, director of the Progressive Film Institute, described the institutes as some of its best customers⁹². Mardy institute showed its sympathetic depiction of the Republican war effort in 'Defence of Madrid'⁹³. In addition to the cinemas, collectively organised 'film clubs' also sprang up to show films that may not typically be found. The *Western Mail* in 1934 reported the establishment in the Rhondda of a film club, the club was described as having 400 members and its officers were drawn from Tylerstown and Tonypany. It was to run monthly shows beginning with the soviet film 'Battleship Potemkin' and a German psychological study⁹⁴.

The various services provided by the independent working-class institutions drove the population of the Rhondda valleys to rely increasingly upon them for a variety of aspects of life. Historians have attempted to interrogate the nature of these services to determine the extent to which they provided an alternative. However, perhaps the most culturally crucial alternative aspect of the institutions was their collective and independent nature. Whilst in the towns of Britain lacking in such an infrastructure, the worker was dependent only upon his own wage and the solvency of the municipal authority to access the services they required. The collective institutions of the valley made this dependent upon the wellbeing of the entire community. Hard times for the community would invariably mean the scaling back of collectively supplied provision. The wage of the employed worker could not spare him so quickly from the recreational desert experienced by the unemployed, and their fates were inextricably connected.

⁸⁷ James, R. (2010) *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste in Britain, 1930-39 : A Round of Cheap Diversions?*, Manchester, Manchester University Press. [Online] p97

⁸⁸ Hogenkamp, B. (1985) 'Miners Cinemas in South Wales in the 1920s and 1930s', *Llafur*, Vol. 4, No. 2 pp68-69 [online]

⁸⁹ Miskell, P. (2000) *Pulpits, Coal pits and Fleapits: A Social History of the Cinema in Wales 1918-1951*, PHD Thesis, Aberystwyth. P174

⁹⁰ (1929) *Kinematograph Yearbook 1929*

⁹¹ Hogenkamp, B. (1985) 'Miners Cinemas in South Wales in the 1920s and 1930s', *Llafur*, Vol. 4, No. 2 p67 [online]

⁹² Hogenkamp, B. (1985) 'Miners Cinemas in South Wales in the 1920s and 1930s', *Llafur*, Vol. 4, No. 2 p64 [Online]

⁹³ Ridgwell, S. (1995), "South Wales and the Cinema in the 1930s", *Welsh History Review*, vol. 17, no. 4, p604. [Online]

⁹⁴ *Western Mail*, Friday 20th April 1934

Conclusion

Independent working-class institutions played a considerable role in working-class culture in the Rhondda valleys.

The difficulty of defining working-class culture is in its vast diversity of both inputs and outcomes. Away from the grey world of determinism, working-class communities are hugely diverse affairs encompassing vastly different belief systems and customs. Even within fixed subdivisions of religion or political belief, the spontaneity of human nature can produce wildly varying outcomes in highly similar circumstances. The Rhondda encompasses this beautifully with its mono-industrial, almost homogeneously working-class landscape giving birth to a diversity of results from similar material conditions. It is also clear, however, that a set of collective norms existed inclusive of this. A resolute commitment to the individual standing with their community was shared by all of the Rhondda's diverse tribes. The power of this value to be inclusive of identities that are at surface level contradictory to it is a testament to its strength and not weakness. It is impossible to determine to what extent this is the 'class consciousness' that historians have sought to prove or disprove in debate around the nature of coalfield societies. The nature of the Rhondda's almost homogeneous class structure, as well as its extreme dependency upon one industry, blurs the dividing line between class and community.

The independent working-class institutions served as a living embodiment of these ideals. The increasing number of services they provided over the period strengthened the complex web of shared interests that the interests of the individual to that of the collective. In towns and villages where provision of services was almost dependent upon collective institutions, one's access to these depended not on individual financial interests but on the collective body of the community. Whilst enquiry into the nature of these institutions has focused on the showing of subversive films or lending of marxist literature as markers of alternative culture, the audience for this was dependent upon the popular appeal of the institutions. This could not have existed without also embracing the draw of popular culture. Without popular appeal and community engagement the much-vaunted pedagogical tools of the institutions could not sustain themselves, nor would they have found the easy access to the uninitiated that the institutes provided. The success of the independent working-class institutions of the Rhondda and their cultural power is drawn directly from this popular appeal.

The place of this in existing historiography is complex and draws, like the culture of the valleys, on a range of narratives that are at surface level contradictory. The existence of an overarching culture in which existing norms could be subordinated to an overriding value of collectivism is at surface level a ringing endorsement of the histories of Hywel Francis, David Smith and their contemporaries. However, these collective values are inclusive in nature, which means a concrete demonstration that they represent class and not community consciousness or were driven by lofty concepts like solidarity is likely to be elusive. The complex and overlapping network of the valleys independent working-class institutions distorted the differentiation between individual and collective interests. Making it almost

impossible to demonstrate a subordination of the individual need to the collective. Even when individuals engaged in what is at surface level self-sacrificing behaviour, they likely gained social capital from it. In this light, the collective culture of the valleys can also exist alongside the narratives of historians such as Royden Harrison and John Williams. The landscape of the Rhondda valleys created a situation where people engaged in collective struggle, whether physically on the picket line, or through contributing to the provision of collective goods and services, could do so whilst acting entirely through self-interest.

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