

Hearts and Mines:  
Women and Emerging National Identity in Wales during the 1984–85 Miners' Strike  
By  
Elizabeth Benoy

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Supervisor: Dr. Joy Dixon  
Committee Members: Dr. Courtney Booker, Dr. Joy Dixon, and Dr. Leslie Paris

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## Introduction

Two weeks after the 1984-85 miners' strike in the United Kingdom began, Christine Powell, a teacher from Seven Sisters, a village in the middle of the South Wales Coalfield, stood in front of her sixth form class explaining a difficult physics concept to her students. She chose to take a break and put on a television programme discussing the unusually calm weather they had been having that spring. Typically, Seven Sisters is rather windy and rainy, yet, the spring of 1984 was remarkably calm. Powell remarked to her class that her "daffodils were still standing," since they weren't "flapping about as they normally do." One of her more vociferous students whispered to his neighbour and said, "I thought they wouldn't have any daffodils up there; they would be black." The student's remark was an allusion to the fact that Powell lived close to the old Seven Sisters Colliery, which was closed in 1963 due to economic problems and deteriorating geological conditions. Powell, as a miner's daughter, granddaughter, and wife, responded, "there aren't any collieries where I live anymore, so the daffodils can't be black."<sup>1</sup> Powell's frustration with her student is evident in her interview. She was frustrated with the student for his stupid comment and with the student's parents, whom she assumed he was parrotting, who were unsympathetic to the strike. She expressed annoyance as well as anger with some community members in Seven Sisters who were disrespectful to the miners who had sacrificed so much for Wales' economic and cultural prosperity.

There is an undeniable sense of nostalgia in Christine Powell's interview. The Wales of her childhood was rapidly disappearing as collieries were closed throughout the coalfield. She lamented that romantic phrases such as "the pit is the mother of the village," which were so frequently stated, sounded very romantic, but for her they were not romantic, but the simple

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<sup>1</sup> Interview of Christine Powell, SWCC AUD/590, 19 November 1985.

truth.<sup>2</sup> Without the colliery, there was nothing to sustain community life. Shops, pubs, and cafes could not remain open when the primary source of employment, the pit, was shut down. Cultural activities hosted by the union, such as brass band concerts, educational classes in Welsh and industrial history, and festivals promoting Welsh culture declined and disappeared in areas where collieries closed. There is a distinctive sadness in her interview at the loss of the economic and cultural centre that was the colliery. Her sadness is mixed with anger about government policy in Westminster over the last twenty years that saw the coal industry fall by the wayside and saw working-class people across Wales lose their livelihoods. The destruction of community life at the hands of Labour and Conservative governments alike fuelled her frustration with London. There was no question about Powell's getting involved in the strike in 1984. While her village had lost its colliery twenty years prior, there were other villages in the valleys that could potentially be saved. Powell referenced her sense of Welsh identity based in Christianity and socialist politics as giving her strength throughout the strike.<sup>3</sup> She epitomized the modern Welsh woman, as she worked outside of the home as a teacher, was involved in local politics, and had a husband who was a striking miner. Christine Powell stated that she recognized early in the strike in 1984 that it was different from the most recent strikes in 1981 and 1983. It was not just to defend one pit, but to protect all pits in Wales that were threatened by Margaret Thatcher and Ian MacGregor (the chairman of the National Coal Board). Powell framed her fight in 1984 as one for the protection of thousands of communities across the Welsh coalfield, and indeed, for what Powell described as a "Welsh way of life."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Interview of Christine Powell.

<sup>3</sup> Interview of Christine Powell.

<sup>4</sup> Interview of Christine Powell.

The sense that there was something distinctly Welsh about the ways in which the strike played out in Wales is evident in Powell's interview. The shared sense of solidarity with other members of the community and the frequent recollection of miners of South Wales' past indicate a distinct connection between Welshness and mining for both men and women. The resonant imagery of Christine Powell's story, of the daffodils standing tall unblackened by the coal dust from Seven Sisters colliery, requires some unpacking. The daffodil is the national flower of Wales, and the image of that flower blackened by coal dust next to an active colliery paradoxically represented prosperity as it signified that the colliery was still open. By 1984, the coal dust that was a physical sign of prosperity had long since vanished from the hillside of Seven Sisters. However, those daffodils, now unblackened, could grow more beautifully than before under Powell's care. While the presence of her daffodils could be seen as an end, the end of coalmining and the end of a prosperous Wales, they can also be seen as a beginning. For the first time, working-class women in the South Wales coalfield framed their contribution to the fight for the miners in national terms. The anger and frustration with Westminster during the strike propelled women to stand up for their communities, for their "Welsh way of life," and for Wales. The proliferation of Powell's daffodils can be seen to represent a new era of politics, an era characterized by agency and autonomy for Wales.

## *Background*

The communities of the South Wales coalfield have, since their inception in the early nineteenth century, been characterized by a largely homogenous working-class sense of collective identity. Men associated their sense of Welshness with their employment in the mines and their membership in the miners' union. Mining was a particularly dangerous form of work, and it was precisely that danger that united Welsh men in camaraderie and solidarity.<sup>5</sup> Women, however, were barred from working underground, and with no other industries in which women could be gainfully employed, most were relegated to the home as mothers and housewives, or to poorly paid part-time work.<sup>6</sup> While women were not involved in the primary labour force in South Wales, nor involved in union politics, they certainly engaged in political activity alongside their menfolk. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries women participated in political movements, from the public shaming rituals of the *ceffyl pren* to the shaming of "scabs," as strikebreakers were called, in the infamous industrial disputes of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Exploitative government policies that threatened the livelihood and survival of mining villages in the South Wales valleys were challenged by entire communities led by women. The first, and most notable example in the early twentieth century, was the 1926 miners' lockout and general strike. The efforts of the miners to secure fair wages were unsuccessful as the government sent in

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<sup>5</sup> Interview of Rees Davies, SWCC AUD/207, 12 December 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Deirdre Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows: A History of Women in Twentieth Century Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 10.

<sup>7</sup> The *ceffyl pren*, literally meaning "wooden horse," was a public shaming ritual that took place in various parts of Wales in the nineteenth century. The victim was mounted on a wooden horse and paraded through the town or village centre accompanied by another village member who delivered a "sermon" denouncing the victim's poor behaviour. Community members launched verbal and physical abuse at the victim, and women were often the instigators of violence. For more information, see Rosemary A. N. Jones, "Women Community, and Collective Action" in *Our Mother's Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History*, ed. Angela V. Johns (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), 20.

the police and the military to defeat the miners and their trade unionist allies.<sup>8</sup> The miners were forced back to work with no settlement. Women contributed in 1926 by organizing soup kitchens, fundraising, coal-picking, and boot repair stations.<sup>9</sup> Community and class consciousness emerged during the 1926 dispute due to the external threat from the government and the sense that communities had to defend themselves.<sup>10</sup>

The subsequent economic depression that persisted throughout the 1930s devastated the South Wales valleys. Thousands of men could not find employment in the coal industry, and as a result scores of working-men left the coalfield in search of work in England.<sup>11</sup> Entire communities suffered due to high unemployment. The nationalization of the coal industry in 1947, after decades of campaigning by the union, marked a high point for the industry and for coalfield communities in South Wales.<sup>12</sup> The 1960s, however, ushered in a new era of uncertainty. Despite promises made in Labour's 1964 manifesto to increase coal output to 200 million tons, Fred Lee, the Minister for Power, unveiled the National Plan which sought a total output of a maximum of 170–180 million tons by 1970.<sup>13</sup> Wilson accelerated the colliery closure programme, closing forty-four pits in South Wales between 1964 and 1969.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the national leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was reluctant to fight the

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<sup>8</sup> Welsh Campaign for Civil and Political Liberties and National Union of Mineworkers (South Wales Area), *Striking Back* (Cardiff: Welsh Campaign for Civil and Political Liberties and the NUM (South Wales Area), 1985), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Hywel Francis, *History on Our Side* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 27.

<sup>10</sup> Francis, *History on Our Side*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Rosemary Crook, "'Tidy Women': Women in the Rhondda between the Wars." *Oral History* 10, no. 2 (1982): 40.

<sup>12</sup> Francis, *History on Our Side*, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Curtis, *The South Wales Miners: 1964-1985* (Cardiff: The University of Wales Press, 2013), 55.

<sup>14</sup> The five years previous saw only thirty three pits closed under a Conservative government. Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 55.



Labour governments that were unwilling to increase investment for the South Wales coalfield because the union was politically allied to the Labour Party.<sup>15</sup> Pits were closed due to deteriorating geological conditions and a chronic lack of investment.<sup>16</sup> Communities again suffered, and married women increasingly took on poorly paid part time work to support their families.<sup>17</sup> The 1970s witnessed a brief “sunny period,” as described by South Wales Coalfield historian Hywel Francis, for large numbers of small, unofficial strikes won increased wages for miners and prevented pit closures.<sup>18</sup> Yet, by the end of the decade, wages and recruitment were gradually declining in comparison to other industries.<sup>19</sup> Francis claimed that it was extremely difficult to keep up recruitment in the coal industry due to the hazards of the work, and because similar skills were better paid in other industries such as steel, which was significantly safer.<sup>20</sup>

Colliery closures affected South Wales disproportionately more than any other area in the United Kingdom because it was a single industry region. When pits closed, most men of working age faced unemployment with little to no opportunity for employment elsewhere. Men were either transferred to other pits, or were left to go on the “dole,” as unemployment insurance is known in the United Kingdom. Pit closures also meant that village amenities, such as pubs, shops, and greengrocers, also closed down.<sup>21</sup> Making matters worse, increased unemployment in the South Wales valleys contributed to increased rates of mental and physical illness, as well as

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<sup>15</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 88.

<sup>16</sup> National Union of Mineworkers (South Wales Area) Annual Report for 1984-85, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Jane Pilcher “Who Should Do the Dishes? Three Generations of Women in Wales” in *Our Sisters Land: Changing Identities of Women in Wales*, ed. Jane Aaron, Teresa Rees, Sandra Betts, and Moira Vincentelli (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 31.

<sup>18</sup> Interview of Hywel Francis [videorecording], Wales Video Gallery V\_\_\_\_/DIG/A/22857, June 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Interview of Hywel Francis.

<sup>20</sup> Interview of Hywel Francis.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Christine Powell.

increased rates of domestic violence and suicide.<sup>22</sup> The slogan “Close a Pit, Kill a Community” was not just a rallying cry, but was a stark reality for thousands of villages.<sup>23</sup>

The 1984–85 miners’ strike occurred within the context of Thatcherism, which vigorously rejected the post-war consensus on the “cradle to grave” welfare state.<sup>24</sup> The components of the welfare state established in Britain following the Second World War included universal healthcare, social insurance regardless of income, and nationalized public industries. The Conservative Party strategy to de-nationalize the coal industry was antithetical to the interests of South Wales. It threatened the livelihood of mining communities, and threatened the future strength of the region as a political force. The Tories’ plan for all nationalized industries, if they were elected, was leaked to *The Economist* in 1978. The “Ridley Report” detailed how the government believed that breaking up the monopolies of nationalized industries and opening them up to competition in the private sector was the solution to Britain’s economic difficulty.<sup>25</sup> The report stipulated that the likelihood of a strike as a result of de-nationalization was significant due to the high level of unionization in the public sector. The Conservatives contended that industrial action “will doubtless occur in a ‘vulnerable industry’ — coal, electricity, or docks.”<sup>26</sup> Coal was singled out as the most likely industry to strike because the

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<sup>22</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities “When They Close a Pit They Kill a Community,” 1984, pamphlet, National Museum of Wales.

<sup>24</sup> The phrase “cradle to grave” was used to describe the proposed system of social security in the 1942 Beveridge Report, which would provide all people in Britain regardless of income with access to state-funded social security.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Ridley, *Final Report of the Nationalized Industries Policy Group*. [London, United Kingdom], The Conservative Research Department 8 July 1977, 1.

<sup>26</sup> The Conservative Group intended to dramatically reduce the number of workers in industries such as coal in order to make them “economic.” *Final Report of the Nationalized Industries Policy Group*, 24.

NUM was one of the strongest unions in the United Kingdom. The Tories' strategy to combat the NUM was fourfold:

[M]ake contingent plans as we can to import coal at short notice.... arrange for haulage companies to recruit in advance a core of non-union lorry drivers to help us move coal where necessary... install dual coal/oil firing in all power stations, where practical as soon as possible... [and c]ut off the supply of money to the strikers and make the union finance them.<sup>27</sup>

Thatcher intended to weaken the effectiveness of a miners' strike by decreasing the dependency on British coal through importing coal from South Africa, Australia, and Poland, as these sources were significantly cheaper.<sup>28</sup> By encouraging the employment of non-unionized lorry drivers, the government would ensure that the transport of coal continued during a dispute. The government intended to weaken the ability of the NUM to support a long strike by stipulating that it was the responsibility of the union to pay striking workers "strike pay," knowing that the NUM would not be able to afford to do so. The final aspect of the Conservatives' strategy was the creation of "a large, mobile squad of police who [were] equipped and prepared to uphold the law..." in the event of violent picketing.<sup>29</sup> The confidential annex to the Ridley Report also revealed that the government aimed to weaken unions by making certain practices, such as secondary picketing, illegal, and by requiring a national ballot for all industrial action.

The 1984–85 miners' strike began on March 12th, 1984 when the National Coal Board (NCB) chairman, Ian MacGregor, announced that 70,000 jobs were to be cut from the coal industry, 20,000 of which were to be from South Wales.<sup>30</sup> Within a week, all of the South Wales

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<sup>27</sup> *Final Report of the Nationalized Industries Policy Group*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Sourcing coal from South Africa was especially deplorable according to the South Wales NUM leadership because coal in South Africa was mined under near slave conditions. NUM (South Wales Area) Annual Report for 1984-84, 42.

<sup>29</sup> *Final Report of the Nationalized Industries Policy Group*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 13.

miners were out on picket lines. The South Wales Area of the NUM provided exceptional leadership, for flying pickets—striking miners who picketed at collieries besides their own—were sent out immediately from South Wales to crucial coalfields like Nottingham to try to convince them to go on strike. Loyalty to the union was weak in places like the North East and Central coalfields, due to the introduction of incentive schemes in the early 1980s which disincentivized solidarity, and hundreds of miners there crossed picket lines as a result.<sup>31</sup>

South Wales striking miners were routinely deployed to pits like Orgreave Colliery near Sheffield to try to prevent scabs from crossing picket lines. Police brutality at Orgreave defined many miners' experiences in the strike and resulted in the loss of trust and respect for the police.<sup>32</sup> Picketers in t-shirts and jeans were assaulted by police officers armed with riot shields, batons, dogs, and horses. Hundreds of strikers were injured and arrested. Women joined men on picket lines for the first time in 1984, and they too experienced violence and discrimination from the police and the law.<sup>33</sup> Media coverage of Orgreave and other violent picket lines was felt by miners and their supporters to be biased in favour of the police.<sup>34</sup> Women expressed disgust and horror with the police and the government for their treatment of the miners and of South Wales. The experience of police brutality represented for women a literal physical assault by the state on the South Wales miners.

A political awareness that had not existed in the Valleys since the 1926 General Strike suddenly exploded, as hundreds of women's support groups were established throughout the South Wales Coalfield. Women collected money, food, clothes, and children's toys, held raffles

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<sup>31</sup> Interview of Des Dutfield, SWCC AUD/465, 6 March 1986.

<sup>32</sup> Interview of Billy Liddon, quoted in Ben Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 218.

<sup>33</sup> Interview of Mary Coombes (Maerdy) quoted in WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 38.

<sup>34</sup> Jill Miller, *You Can't Kill the Spirit: Women in a Welsh Mining Valley* (London: The Women's Press, 1986), 17.

and rummage sales, organized rallies in Port Talbot, Cardiff, and London, and made passionate speeches about the miners' plight.<sup>35</sup> For many women, socialism took on a new meaning, as the support groups they ran established a patchwork welfare state throughout the South Wales Coalfield. The perceived threat from the government reignited a fervour in women in South Wales for their unique history and for their distinct identity. Women were galvanized to act in their own defense to preserve their communities, primarily through the successful development of an "alternative welfare state" in the South Wales Valleys.<sup>36</sup> The momentum initiated by the South Wales coalfield communities' defense of their history and identity during the 1984–85 miners' strike constituted a mandate for Welsh autonomy.

Women articulated their experiences during the strike as a merging of class and national consciousness in a way which they had not experienced before. Women's justifications for establishing a welfare state independent of the British government revealed early articulations of the arguments used for devolution in the 1990s, most notably in the claim that Wales had to be in charge of its own affairs in order to develop its industry and take care of its communities.

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<sup>35</sup> Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 165.

<sup>36</sup> The term "alternative welfare state" is used extensively in Francis' analyses of the strike, and will be employed throughout this thesis. Francis, *History on Our Side*, 80.

### *Historiography of the 1984–85 strike*

Scholars of mining and industrial conflict more broadly do not take into account female voices. Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, who produced the earliest hypothesis on the reasons for the propensity of miners to strike, failed to address how women, who often made up half of any given mining community, contributed to the militancy of their menfolk. Their “isolated mass” hypothesis, first published in 1954, argued that miners “form isolated masses, almost a ‘race apart’ [for whom] the strike... is a kind of colonial revolt against a far removed authority [and that] the union becomes a kind of working-class party or even government for these employees, rather than just another association among many.”<sup>37</sup> Kerr and Siegel’s thesis has been heavily criticized since its publication, especially in its failure to take into account intra-industry differences caused by differences in investment.<sup>38</sup> Subsequent criticisms have not, however, addressed their lack of attention to women in mining communities, nor how women contributed to radical politics.<sup>39</sup> Kerr and Siegel’s hypothesis paints miners as homogeneously militant, but fails to address the concurrent militancy of the “fairer sex” in these “isolated masses.”

Historical considerations of Welsh identity and its connection to mining and militancy in South Wales rarely include discussions of women, nor do the sociological studies upon which they are based include female respondents. The framework for this thesis is based on Denis Balson’s “Three Wales Model,” which postulates three distinct regions and sets of identities within Wales: “*Y Fro Gymraeg*” (the traditionally Welsh-speaking heartland of Wales in the

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<sup>37</sup> Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, “The Interindustry Propensity to Strike - an international comparison,” in *Industrial Conflict*, ed. Arthur Kornhauser, Robert Dubin, and Arthur M. Ross (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954), 191-5.

<sup>38</sup> Roy Church, Quentin Outram, David N. Smith, “The ‘isolated mass’ revisited: strikes in British coal mining,” *Sociological Review* 39, no. 1 (1991): 57.

<sup>39</sup> Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 10.

west and north west); the “Valley-Welsh” in the central and southern valleys; and the “British-Welsh” on the south coast and eastern border.<sup>40</sup> The South Wales coalfield lies in the central and southern valleys, and this thesis is limited geographically to that region and people characterized as the “Valley Welsh.” Balson’s study also suggested “that Welsh identity is a sedimented element of Welsh working-class consciousness,” illustrating that being working-class and being Welsh were one and the same in the valleys.<sup>41</sup> Brian Roberts, in his sociological study of Welsh identity in the late twentieth century, expands on Balson’s model, and argues that the “Valley Welsh” are characterized by radicalism and a distinct mining identity with a sense of struggle against exploitation and disadvantage.<sup>42</sup> Roberts does not address how the sense of exploitation and disadvantage was also experienced by women, nor how such experiences of exploitation were an inherent part of the structure of mining communities where women in the domestic sphere completed daily unpaid labour with no distinction between work and leisure time.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, he does not address women at all, and fails to include more than one female respondent in his analysis of valleys identity. Likewise, Kenneth Morgan’s assertion that Wales was increasingly considered a nation rather than a region fails to include responses from Welsh women.<sup>44</sup> Balson, Roberts, and Morgan do not adequately include the voices of women in their

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<sup>40</sup> Denis Balson, “The Three Wales Model” in *The National Question Again*, ed. John Osmond (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1985), 5.

<sup>41</sup> David L. Adamson, *Class, Ideology and the Nation: A Theory of Welsh Nationalism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), 169.

<sup>42</sup> Brian Roberts, “Welsh Identity in a Former Mining Valley: Social Images and Imagined Communities” in *Nation, Identity and Social Theory*, ed. Ralph Fevre and Andrew Thompson (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 115.

<sup>43</sup> Mari A. Williams, “Aspects of women’s working lives in the mining communities of South Wales” *Folk Life* 38, no.1 (1999), 64

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, *Modern Wales: Politics, Places and People* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), 3.

examinations of Welsh identity, and therefore fail to understand how half of Wales' population understood Welshness.

Many of the histories written of the 1984–85 miners' strike, as well as of the South Wales coalfield more broadly, are dominated by male voices. The public experiences of men, as miners, union members, and breadwinners, are typically elevated above the experiences of women, who are relegated to the private sphere of the home, or marginalized in “women's sections” of political groups.<sup>45</sup> As a number of feminist historians have argued, Welsh history is dominated by the male perspective because the Welsh identity is based on masculine ideals. Deirdre Beddoe, a scholar of women's history in Wales, posits that Welsh identity “has been constructed with reference to only one sex, to only one class, and to only one sector of the Welsh economic base: the industrial sector.”<sup>46</sup> To be Welsh is to be male, working-class, and a miner. Welsh women are either ignored completely in Welsh history or presented as the stereotypical “Welsh man,” a character who embodied all the nineteenth century's ideals of womanhood: piety, good work ethic, and obedience to her husband.<sup>47</sup> While scholars in the last twenty years have sought to elevate women's historical voices, their experiences, especially in scholarship on the 1984–85 miners' strike, are still marginalized. Ben Curtis' comprehensive work outlines the major themes and events in the South Wales coalfield in the post-war period, yet fails to adequately address women's experiences.<sup>48</sup> Conversely, Hywel Francis' memoir broadens the discussion of

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<sup>45</sup> For example, the women's section of Plaid Cymru, the Party of Wales, was separate from the male-dominated party environment and engaged in traditionally female activities such as the organization of jumble sales and coffee mornings. For more information, see *Our Sisters' Land*, 246.

<sup>46</sup> Deirdre Beddoe, “Images of Welsh Women” in *Wales: The Imagined Nation, Studies in Cultural and National Identity*, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986), 227.

<sup>47</sup> Beddoe, “Images of Welsh Women,” 229.

<sup>48</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 209-10.



women's activities during the strike, especially the role women played in creating the "alternative welfare state" as he terms the system of support groups that sustained communities during the strike.<sup>49</sup> Since Francis' text is written as a personal memoir, he does not examine the experiences of women as they understood them. The rest of Francis' body of work likewise fails to consider women's understanding of the strike on their own terms.<sup>50</sup> Other scholars, who write on the 1984–85 strike, including Martin Adney, John Lloyd, Penny Green, and M. J. Parker, do not adequately address the gendered implications of the strike, and ultimately fail to address the ways in which women's experiences in the strike differed from men's.<sup>51</sup>

To gain insight into how women understood their experiences during the strike, we must turn to the body of work written by women at the time of, or shortly after, the strike. There are few histories of women in the 1984-85 strike written in the new millennium, which means that much of the historical work lacks the required temporal distance from the events to provide any sort of broader reflection on the subject. These early histories of women's involvement in the strike focus on how the lives of women were changed through their involvement in support groups. Jill Miller's work is a non-academic exploration of Welsh women's experience in Abertillery, Wales during the strike.<sup>52</sup> Miller's work features interviews with members of the Abertillery Women's Group that detail their personal backgrounds as well as their experience

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<sup>49</sup> Francis, *History on Our Side*, 80.

<sup>50</sup> Francis' writing on the South Wales miners is extensive. Some of the work he has done, which is referenced later in this thesis, includes *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980); "No Surrender in the Valleys: the 1984-85 miners strike in south Wales." *Llafur* 5, no. 2 (1989) which is co-written with Gareth Rees; oral interviews recorded in 2005 which are stored in the National Library of Wales.

<sup>51</sup> Martin Adeney and John Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike 1984–5: Loss Without Limit* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1986); Penny Green, *The Enemy Without* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990); M. J. Parker, *Thatcherism and the Fall of Coal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> Miller, *You Can't Kill the Spirit*.

with the strike. Vicky Seddon's text examines various women's experiences during the strike from across Great Britain, but highlights the voices of Welsh women in one chapter. Like Miller's work, Seddon demonstrates that women experienced a greater conception of class consciousness during the strike.<sup>53</sup> Both of these texts are framed through a class perspective, and suggest that women in Wales experienced a political awakening over the course of the strike. The idea that the strike empowered women to take on new responsibilities, and that they would never return to the private domestic sphere to which they had been relegated, was prominent following the end of the strike in 1985. Moiram Ali's work describes women's concern with the strike to be due to its effect on the family, as "pit closures would mean mass unemployment... [which] would affect not only men, but the family."<sup>54</sup> Ali's chapter, while it provides important insight into the reasons women got involved in the strike, such as concerns over the future of opportunities for children in mining communities, downplays the colourful history of women involved in industrial disputes before the 1984 strike. While this may be a result of her focus on England, where the tradition of women's involvement in strikes was less significant than in Wales, Ali's text does not give credit to the women of Wales who defended their communities in the early nineteenth century. Carole Harwood's chapter is one of the few works to firmly link women's involvement in the strike to a longer history of Welsh women's involvement in extra-parliamentary politics in Wales.<sup>55</sup> I am striving to build upon Harwood's work in examining the

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<sup>53</sup> Vicky Seddon (ed.) *The Cutting Edge: Women and the Pit Strike* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986).

<sup>54</sup> Moiram Ali, "The Coal War: Women's Struggle during the Miners' Strike" in *Caught Up in Conflict: Women's Responses to Political Strife*, ed. Rosemary Ridd and Helen Callaway (London: Macmillan Education, 1986), 86.

<sup>55</sup> Carole Harwood, "A Woman's Place" in *Striking Back*, ed. Welsh Campaign for Civil and Political Liberties and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) (Cardiff: Welsh Campaign for Civil and Political Liberties and the NUM (South Wales Area), 1985).

importance of that long history of Welsh women's political involvement in their conception of Welshness.

Deirdre Beddoe's *Our Mother's Land* is the other major text to argue for a long history of women's involvement in politics in Wales in spite of women's exclusion from union and parliamentary activities. Beddoe's work focuses specifically on Wales, but only in terms of geography.<sup>56</sup> She frames the 1984-85 strike in particular as the greatest example of female involvement in industrial and labour politics in Wales. Beddoe places Welsh women's activism within the larger context of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s. Her work on the strike does not focus on how Welsh women involved in the strike understood their activities in terms of national identity or nationalism, but rather on how women understood their class identity. There is as yet no academic work which analyses how women in mining communities in South Wales conceptualized the strike in relationship to their sense of national identity. This thesis aims to explore how women in the South Wales coalfield felt compelled to contribute to the strike because of their family history and conceptions of national identity. Class and national identity were one and the same in South Wales for both men and women. Welsh women articulated their fight for the miners as a fight for Wales.

I want to take a moment to make some definitions clear. I will use the term "community" to describe the mining villages that are dotted throughout the South Wales valleys, as women across Britain framed their struggle in the 1984-85 miners' strike in terms of "community."<sup>57</sup> The survival of their own pit communities lay at the heart of the dispute, as women understood

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<sup>56</sup> Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*.

<sup>57</sup> Meg Allen, "Women, 'Community,' and the British Miners' Strike of 1984-85" in *Women Resist Globalization: Mobilizing for Livelihood and Rights*, ed. Sheila Rowbotham and Stephanie Linkogle (London: Zed Books, 2001), 46.

the strike to be a matter of life or death for their villages. Scholarship on conceptions of “community” within the context of the strike reveals that women tend to use the word community to describe their own locality, their own village. Meg Allen delineates the various dimensions of community, as it is used by Welsh women in the valleys. The term appears to have a territorial dimension as well as a social one. Community refers both to the physical village itself, and to the sense of community with neighbours, families, and friends. Allen further argues that community also includes “a sense of belonging and personal, emotive connection.”<sup>58</sup> Women’s shared sense of struggle, as housewives, as wives of miners, and as general community members in isolated mining valleys, bound women together, and facilitated a “mutual orientation to social action.”<sup>59</sup> Jean Spence and Carol Stephenson echo Allen’s point in their article on mining communities in north-east England. They provide, however, greater insight into the gendered implications of defining community. Spence and Stephenson compare how “the collaborative relationships established between men in the hostile conditions of the pit undoubtedly had their counterpart in solidaristic relationships associated between home and place [for women].”<sup>60</sup> The sense of unity and solidarity between women was strong in South Wales villages because of their shared history, identity, and struggle, both alongside men in industrial disputes, and within the home.

However, mining villages in South Wales were not static. They had been rapidly changing since the end of the 1960s, when colliery closures began to significantly affect community life. The definition of community has thus been challenged by scholars of women in

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<sup>58</sup> Allen, “Women, ‘Community,’ and the British Miners’ Strike of 1984-85,” 46-47.

<sup>59</sup> G. Neuwirth, “A Weberian outline of a theory of community: its application to the ‘Dark Ghetto,’” *British Journal of Sociology* 20, 2, (1969), 149.

<sup>60</sup> Jean Spence and Carol Stephenson, “‘Side by Side with Our Men?’ Women’s Activism, Community, and Gender in the 1984–85 British Miners’ Strike” *International Labour and Working Class History* 75, no.1 (2009): 72.

the 1984–85 strike. Rebecca Davies, for example, in her PhD dissertation questioned the above definition of community, as miners increasingly travelled outside of their village for work.<sup>61</sup> Spence and Stephenson point out how “mining community and mining village were no longer synonymous” in 1984.<sup>62</sup> Villages that lost their pits could no longer sustain a cohesive population. As pits closed, men had no choice but to seek employment beyond the village, or to accept redundancy payments.<sup>63</sup> The boundaries of communities became less discrete as a result of men going further afield for work.<sup>64</sup> Spence and Stephenson rightly argue, however, that the discourse around the 1984 miners’ strike included “frequent references to ‘mining village,’ usually in association with female action.”<sup>65</sup> Although the reality for mining communities had changed due to the closure of collieries, the conception of a “mining village” or “pit community” remained. Ideas of community and notions of the boundaries of those communities and what bound them together remained constant.

### *Justification for Oral History*

Historians of the working class turned to oral history as an alternative source, according to Joan Sangster, a historian of the working class and women, because oral history allows for both “a class analysis that [takes] into account experience and human agency, and . . . [a recovery of] the lives of historical actors.... who [have] left fewer written records created by

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<sup>61</sup> Rebecca Davies, “‘Not Just Supporting But Leading’: The Involvement of Women of the South Wales Coalfield in the 1984–85 Miners’ Strike” (Ph.D., University of Glamorgan: 2010), 5.

<sup>62</sup> Spence and Stephenson, “‘Side by Side with Our Men?,”” 74.

<sup>63</sup> Interview of Peter Evans, SWCC AUD/466, 3 March 1986.

<sup>64</sup> Spence and Stephenson, “‘Side by Side with Our Men?,”” 74.

<sup>65</sup> Spence and Stephenson, “‘Side by Side with Our Men?,”” 74.

their own hands or in their own voices.”<sup>66</sup> The recovery of the lives of historical actors who have left fewer records is especially pertinent to the history of women in Wales. Francis even claims that “for the historian of the twentieth century to ignore oral evidence is tantamount to... writing off whole areas of human experience.”<sup>67</sup> Women’s historical experiences are often left out of historical records, such as census records, parliamentary debates, or union records, due to their exclusion from full-time employment, or from such institutions as parliament and trade unions.<sup>68</sup> Kim Howells, then historian with the South Wales Area of the National Union of Mineworkers, attests that “history cannot operate without a full range of sources.”<sup>69</sup> For a history of women in Wales, that full range of sources must include oral testimony. Oral history provides an avenue by which the historian can better understand how women interpreted their historical experiences on their own terms. Alessandro Portelli, one of the leading oral historians in the twentieth century, argued that the “importance of oral testimony may not lie in its adherence to fact, but rather its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge,” and that the way subjects narrativize their experience “is indeed a historical *fact*.”<sup>70</sup> Welsh women’s interpretation of their experiences is the focus of this study, and thus using women’s own words to understand and analyze their experiences is integral to understanding how they understood the strike on their own terms.

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<sup>66</sup> Joan Sangster, “Politics and Praxis in Canadian Working-Class Oral History,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2016), 61.

<sup>67</sup> Hywel Francis, “The Secret World of the South Wales Miner: The Relevance of Oral History” in *A People and a Proletariat*, ed. David Smith (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1980), 167.

<sup>68</sup> Williams, “Aspects of women’s working lives in the mining communities of South Wales,” 58.

<sup>69</sup> Howells, Kim, and Merfyn Jones. “Oral History and Contemporary History.” *Oral History* 11, no. 2 (Autumn 1983): 15.

<sup>70</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2016), 52-53.

Without oral testimony, any history of the strike, especially a history of women's involvement, would not be able to adequately illustrate the complexities and nuances of the strike as women experienced it. For a project that discusses perception, experience, and ideas about identity, to neglect to use oral history would be to do injustice to lived experiences of the very people I am discussing. Historians with the South Wales Miners' Library who cultivated thousands of hours of audio recordings on the strike said that "the only way to recapture the spirit of that strike is to talk to people who were involved in it."<sup>71</sup> The interviews collected at the Miners' Library were conducted either in the midst of the strike, or within a year following the conclusion of the dispute, so the accounts that are preserved are representative of women's experiences as they themselves understood them at that time. I will rely on these oral interviews with women involved in support groups across the South Wales coalfield, as well as those of male members of miners' lodges conducted by historians with the Miners' Library between 1984 and 1986. I am striving to elevate the voices of women in order to better examine how they understood their experiences in the strike to be representative of a struggle for all of Wales.

### *Methodology*

In the first chapter, the dimensions of Welsh identity are examined in order to parse out the gendered elements of how Welsh identity is understood by women in the South Wales coalfield. The familial connection to mining through fathers and grandfathers contributed to women's understanding of Welsh identity as intrinsically linked to mining. Women also connected their sense of identity to an involvement in leftist politics, which I attribute to women's long history of extra-parliamentary involvement in politics in Wales.

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<sup>71</sup> Interview of Sian James and Margaret Donovan, SWCC AUD/503, 5 November 1986.

The second chapter addresses women's engagement with Margaret Thatcher's policies regarding the miners, especially the expansion of the powers of the police on picket lines, the 1977 Ridley Report, the 1980 Employment Act, and the NCB decision in 1984 to close all but three pits in South Wales. Women interpreted government policy to be targeting Wales *specifically*, which many women felt was indicative of a growing gap between the interests of South Wales and Westminster.

The final chapter examines the ways in which women articulated their struggle within their own communities to be an effort to preserve a "Welsh way of life" and, indeed, articulated their struggle as one in defense of all of Wales. I establish that women understood their sense of Welsh identity to be one deeply rooted in the tradition of mining, and that they framed their involvement in the 1984–85 strike as a fight for Wales, which in turn reflected an early articulation of the argument for increased autonomy for Wales in the 1990s.



## Chapter One:

### “It’s not romantic at all, it’s true!.” Women’s connection to coalfield communities

Dulais Valley miners’ wives  
Standing at their husbands sides,  
Fighting for the right to work,  
Unity is strength

— “Dulais Valley Miners’ Wives Song”

Welsh identity and working-class identity are inherently linked in the South Wales valleys. Invocations of Welshness in South Wales generally feature romantic images of vibrant pit communities, bustling with coal-blackened miners and their dutiful wives and families, which evoke emotive notions of community, unity, and working-class solidarity, all of which are focussed on the colliery. Hywel Francis argued that “the valleys... were synonymous with a particular kind of distinctive monoculture: coal, community... trade unionism, self-education, democracy and socialism.”<sup>72</sup> The monoculture Francis described informed notions of identity in South Wales that manifested in the image of self-educated, politically radical miner. The association of Welsh identity with mining, however, is an inherently masculine one. Deirdre Beddoe argues that Welsh identity is indeed overwhelmingly masculine: “Wales, land of my fathers, is a land of coalminers, rugby players and male voice choirs.”<sup>73</sup> Mining is a particularly dangerous form of work, which is precisely why it cultivated such a distinct sense of solidarity amongst men in South Wales, the majority of whom were indeed miners. The histories and traditions that make up the Welsh nation are focussed almost exclusively on men and their struggle in the mines and in industrial disputes.

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<sup>72</sup> Francis, *History on Our Side*, 98.

<sup>73</sup> Beddoe, “Images of Welsh Women,” 227.

Women's historical experiences are almost always left out of constructions of Welsh identity because women were not directly involved in the coal industry. Nevertheless, women's conceptions of their identity were also based on mining. The dominance of the coal industry in South Wales cemented the link between mining and community, as communal life was guided by the pit. Women's familial connections to mining, their own forms of struggle domestically in the daily labour of maintaining the home, as well as in public life in their supportive role in struggles alongside men, contributed to their sense of Welshness. In this chapter, I begin with an exploration of the division of gender within Welsh communities and how that division governed the roles of both men and women: men as miners, involved in the public sphere of trade unionism and politics, and women in the private sphere of the home. Despite this division, women participated in politics alongside men. The historical dominance of coal and the miners' union informed ideas about Welshness, yet those very ideas were inherently masculine in nature. I conclude with a discussion of women's familial connection to mining and their association of their own Welsh identity with the pit community.

The monoculture of the South Wales coalfield communities described by Francis is one that has been questioned by scholars. Donald Anderson, a former Labour MP for Swansea East, argued that "the problem with Welsh identity in the valleys is that much of [its] distinctiveness is derived from... a romantically remembered past of the cohesion of single-class communities buttressed by the pit..."<sup>74</sup> The romantically remembered mining community, he argued, does a disservice to the actual histories of those places. While Anderson's discussion was in the context of the crisis of socialism in the 1970s in light of Welsh nationalism, which he contends was a threatening force, his critique of the romanticization of mining communities also applies to the

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<sup>74</sup> Donald Anderson, "Reconciling Socialism with Community" in *The National Question Again*, ed. John Osmond (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1985), 177.

ways in which coalfield communities were divided by gender. Welsh women's historians have previously argued that the gender divide informed women's daily lives in Wales due to the division of labour. Deirdre Beddoe contended that the "doctrine of separate spheres" was especially evident in mining communities because of the economic development of South Wales, which was dominated by heavy industries (coal, steel, and docks) that barred female employment.<sup>75</sup> In her sociological study of women's concepts of identity, Jane Pilcher substantiated Beddoe's claim, and argued that "feminine identities [in Wales are] firmly grounded in the domestic sphere... due to the lack of female employment opportunities associated with the overwhelming dominance of heavy industry in South Wales."<sup>76</sup> Women were not permitted to work underground in collieries, and there was no comparable manufacturing work for women as there was in England.<sup>77</sup> The few opportunities for paid employment for women, as well as the social demands of the doctrine of separate spheres, meant that most women worked solely in the home.

As numerous Welsh women's historians have noted, women's work in the home was essential to the coal industry. Mari A. Williams argues that men were dependent on their wives or grown up daughters to take care of them.<sup>78</sup> The Welsh woman was expected to provide her husband with a warm meal and a bath upon his return from the mines, raise the children, and continually work to keep coal dust out of the home. Carole Harwood, in her study of Welsh women in the valleys, claims that women have historically been relegated to a supporting role for their husbands:

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<sup>75</sup> Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 12; Beddoe, "Images of Welsh Women," 230.

<sup>76</sup> Pilcher "Who Should Do the Dishes? Three Generations of Women in Wales," 31.

<sup>77</sup> The only employment opportunities for women in the South Wales valleys were domestic service, shop work, or teaching. Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 10.

<sup>78</sup> Williams, "Aspects of women's working lives in the mining communities of South Wales," 65.

the calendar of [women's] "historical" lives is ticked off by their men's shifts, their periods of unemployment, their times of industrial struggle. The reality of women's own lives, varied, colourful, and exciting becomes blurred to the point of invisibility so half a population disappears off the historical map.<sup>79</sup>

Both Harwood and Beddoe argue that a woman's position within industrial Welsh history is flattened to the point of non-existence, as her activities independent of her husband are erased. The only representation of women was in the form of the "Welsh mam," the idealized figure of womanhood in industrial South Wales. Beddoe describes her vision of the Welsh mam as hardworking, clean, and pious: "she scrubs her floors, and her husband's coal-black back. She is, of course, a mother, mainly the mother of sons who like her husband are also coalminers."<sup>80</sup> Welsh women's only place in the history of the nation was in their role as mothers and wives.

The image Beddoe paints of the Welsh mam deliberately leaves out the harsh reality for women. Women's domestic work was immensely difficult, as there was no electricity, hot water, cookers, or indoor lavatories.<sup>81</sup> Women did all the washing, cleaning, and cooking in the home, all of which was done around the clock depending on when the men of the household returned from the colliery.<sup>82</sup> Leisure time was almost non-existent for the wives of miners because their domestic chores took up the whole day. In addition to their domestic work, women also struggled with the difficulties of multiple pregnancies. Mining families were very large in the first half of the twentieth century, and "women suffered... because of their propensity to frequent pregnancies which left them exhausted and drained."<sup>83</sup> The maternal mortality rate was extremely high in Welsh mining valleys, standing at 11.9 deaths per 1000 in the Rhondda

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<sup>79</sup> Harwood, "A Woman's Place," 25.

<sup>80</sup> Beddoe, "Images of Welsh Women," 229.

<sup>81</sup> Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 16.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, "Aspects of women's working lives in the mining communities of South Wales," 64.

<sup>83</sup> Williams, "Aspects of women's working lives in the mining communities of South Wales," 65.

compared to 4.41 deaths per 1000 in all of England and Wales in 1935.<sup>84</sup> Harwood points to the high maternal mortality rate in Wales as evidence of women's silent form of struggle within the home.<sup>85</sup> As the twentieth century wore on, married women were increasingly employed outside of the home, as pit closures in the 1960s left many men either unemployed or forced to transfer to collieries elsewhere.<sup>86</sup> As the frequency of industrial disputes increased in the 1970s and 1980s, women had the responsibility of their work, their domestic chores, and keeping families together, despite tension with husbands who were home all day while on strike, as well as providing for their children.<sup>87</sup> Women's history in Wales characterizes their historical experiences as unrecognized domestic struggles in male-dominated communal environments.

Women's struggles, however, also extended beyond the home. Many women throughout Welsh history engaged in radical leftist politics alongside men, which contributed to the idea that militancy and struggle were associated with Welshness. While Welsh men engaged in militant trade unionism to improve their wages and working conditions, women participated in militancy to protect their homes, their families, and their communities. There is a long history of women in South Wales participating in, and even leading, riots and protests.<sup>88</sup> Women's long history of involvement in radical politics is a point of pride for many women who later took critical leadership positions in the 1984-85 miners' strike. As I note above, women were historically engaged in forms of communal protest, such as the *ceffyl pren* tradition wherein community members were publicly shamed while tied to a large wooden horse in the centre of the village.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Williams, "Aspects of women's working lives in the mining communities of South Wales," 65.

<sup>85</sup> Harwood, "A Woman's Place," 26.

<sup>86</sup> Pilcher, "Who Should Do the Dishes?," 31.

<sup>87</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 36.

<sup>88</sup> Harwood, "A Woman's Place," 25.

<sup>89</sup> Jones, "Women Community, and Collective Action," 20.

Women were also involved in the Chartist movement, despite the fact that the reforms protesters called for did not include extending the franchise to women. Harwood discusses how women took on leadership roles during this period, including the establishment of “Female Radical Associations run by and for women chartists... [where women] elected their own officers and passed highly political resolutions [which] were sent to the Home Secretary or the Queen.”<sup>90</sup> The greatest example of their involvement in radical politics referenced by women in the 1980s was their involvement in the 1926 General Strike. The 1926 general strike was remembered by Welsh mining communities in 1984 as one of the most difficult struggles for the miners until the present dispute. In 1926 as in the 1980s, women participated in traditional methods of support such as food collection and fundraising, but also took to the streets in protest, and publicly shamed and attacked scabs.<sup>91</sup> The most extraordinary efforts by women in 1926 were their establishment of soup kitchens, which sustained their communities during the strike. The communal kitchen is remembered as the cement which held miners, their families, and their communities together during the long and bitter strike.<sup>92</sup> Harwood summarizes succinctly how “women have... fought, at every level, to preserve their rights and the rights of the communities in which they live.”<sup>93</sup> There is a long legacy of women’s struggle for their communities in South Wales from the food riots of the eighteenth centuries to their presence on picket lines alongside the men, fighting to keep the mines open. Memories of the history of militancy, therefore, informed women’s understanding of their identity and their understanding of Welshness.

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<sup>90</sup> Harwood, “A Woman’s Place,” 27.

<sup>91</sup> Harwood, “A Woman’s Place,” 28.

<sup>92</sup> Francis, *The Fed*, 56.

<sup>93</sup> Harwood, “A Woman’s Place,” 30.

Despite the long history of women's involvement in extra-parliamentary politics in South Wales, however, Welshness continued to be associated with men and masculinity. Solidarity between men in the mines and in the miners' union defined Welsh identity in the twentieth century. Mining was a very difficult and dangerous job that required men to spend long hours cramped in dark crevices deep underground. Disasters were highly probable, and even if one wasn't killed or maimed in an environmental accident, the likelihood of contracting pneumoconiosis, or black lung, was extremely high. Yet the constant collective danger also contributed to a feeling of solidarity and mutual cooperation: "there's nothing like the atmosphere of the mines... all as one together."<sup>94</sup> The atmosphere of unity experienced by men also existed outside of the workforce in men's involvement in the miners' union and politics. The South Wales Miners' Federation was founded in 1898, and was the first unified organization of miners in South Wales. "The Fed," as it was known by its contemporaries, embodied the spirit of cooperation and solidarity between men in the South Wales coalfield. As women were not permitted to work underground, they were barred from membership to the union.

Although women were excluded from membership to the miners' union, they were involved in the cultural activities hosted by the Fed, which helped foster a sense of distinctiveness from the rest of the British coalfield. The Fed organized educational and cultural opportunities, as well as cultural events for miners and their families, in addition to its role as an industrial organization fighting for wages, hours, and safety standards.<sup>95</sup> Francis argued that the Fed had "a record second to none over many decades in its concern for its communities [and] the cultural and educational heritage of Wales."<sup>96</sup> Through the union, the South Wales miners

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<sup>94</sup> Interview of Rees Davies, SWCC AUD/207, 12 December 1972.

<sup>95</sup> Interview of Hywel Francis.

<sup>96</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 13.

established numerous cultural centres in mining communities, including libraries and cinemas, as well as “workmen’s institutes,” that provided a space for miners to join together for union meetings.<sup>97</sup> The union also provided educational opportunities for men to learn about industrial relations, economics, mining law, and safety issues around the coalfield.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the union organized and hosted numerous cultural events to promote Welsh heritage, including miners’ galas, an annual Eisteddfod, brass band concerts, and male choral concerts.<sup>99</sup> No other union in Britain had the same kind of cultural presence as the South Wales Miners’ Federation did. The legacy of the miners in South Wales spanned generations, as the cultural connection among mining, the union, and Welsh heritage was solidified in the South Wales coalfield by the early twentieth century.<sup>100</sup> However, the legacy of the miners continued to be a masculine one. The union was an all-male organization, and even though women could participate in cultural activities, they had no part to play in the union as a whole.

Women felt a sense of unity and solidarity with the union due to their own loyalty to their communities. While they were not members of the union, the work that the union did within communities to foster people’s cultural lives meant that women too felt a sense of connection to the union. The importance of lodge banners and silver and brass bands, for instance, in boosting morale was well documented in the 1980s. Hefina Headon of Seven Sisters, who was extremely active during the 1984–85 strike, recalled how when the old Seven Sisters lodge banner was carried through the town with an accompanying silver band it “helped a lot” to bolster people’s support for the dispute, as it helped people remember their connection to the union, to mining,

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<sup>97</sup> Interview of Hywel Francis.

<sup>98</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 112.

<sup>99</sup> The Eisteddfod is a bilingual cultural festival in Wales that features competitions of literature, poetry and music that dates back to the twelfth century.

<sup>100</sup> Interview of Hywel Francis.



and to their community.<sup>101</sup> Although the miners' union and its activities were male-dominated, entire communities benefited from cultural activities hosted by the union. These cultural activities fostered a distinctive sense of unity for women as a community based on mining, Welsh heritage, and solidarity between its members.

Both men and women associated Welsh identity with mining in South Wales in the 1980s. For men, being “a *miner*... was a tradition, part of the culture,” and likewise being a miners' wife, daughter, sister, or niece was part of the culture for Welsh women.<sup>102</sup> Mining was a part of the culture in South Wales because the villages were built around the pit, and all male family members worked in the pit. Women's association with mining was expressed through the family connection to the industry. The women who made up the Merthyr Vale Women's Support Group described in 1986 how they were raised with the colliery, and that mining “[was] part of a way of life” in the South Wales valleys.<sup>103</sup> Mining went back through generations, as illustrated by Christine Powell when she describes how her “grandfather was a miner, [and her] other grandfather was a miner.”<sup>104</sup> In the same way, Jill Miller's memoir features women from numerous Welsh mining valleys who express the same familial connection to mining. Nita from Six Bells, Abertillery embodies that generational connection to mining:

My dad is a retired miner. He was one of fourteen children, seven boys and seven girls. All the boys went down the mine. I never knew his father, my grandad. He was a miner too... My husband works in the pit, my brothers do too. All of my family have always been in mining.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Interview of Hefina Headon, SWCC AUD/510, 19 November 1985

<sup>102</sup> Interview of Glyn Roberts, quoted in Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 231.

<sup>103</sup> Interview of Women's Support Group - Merthyr Vale, SWCC VID/44, 1986.

<sup>104</sup> Interview of Christine Powell.

<sup>105</sup> Miller, *You Can't Kill the Spirit*, 33.

The generational connection between women and mining—grandfathers, fathers, and now husbands and brothers— was well documented in oral testimony from the coalfield. Many women justified their involvement in the 1984–85 strike by noting that it was precisely because their fathers and grandfathers were miners and it was part of the culture. And although many women did not want their children to be miners because it was such a dangerous profession, the position of coal as a national icon remained fundamental in South Wales.<sup>106</sup>

The familial connection to mining as well as the cultural centrality of the union held an important place in women’s conceptions of their association of mining with Welshness. The experiences of their mothers and grandmothers as miners’ wives who struggled both within and outside of the home, as well as the cultural centrality of the colliery and the union, cemented in women’s minds the notion that mining and Welshness were one and the same. In his study of Welsh nationalism in the late twentieth century, Leighton Andrews references a book review written on contemporary works of Welsh history which determines the origins of this idea:

the personal memory, local and specific, is then suddenly connected with the history of thousands of people, through several generations. As the particular and the general, the personal and the social are at last brought together, each kind of memory and sense of identity is clarified and strengthened. The relations between people and “a people” begin to move in the mind.<sup>107</sup>

The sense for women that South Wales was distinct because it was so heavily dominated by coal and because of the monolithic role of the South Wales Miners’ Federation in fostering cultural awareness of Welsh heritage was immense. Even though women were not directly involved in the industry, the history of their roles as supportive wives and daughters, as well as their

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<sup>106</sup> Interview of Kim Powells [motion picture], Wales Video Gallery V\_\_\_/D/G/A/22857, 5 July 2011.

<sup>107</sup> Raymond Williams quoted in Leighton Andrews, *Wales Says Yes: The Inside Story of the Yes for Wales Referendum Campaign* (Bridgend: Seren, 1999), 41.

activities in radical politics alongside men, fostered in them a national consciousness that was derived from the link between mining and Welshness.

The sense that mining was inherently linked to Welshness for women was derived both from the familial connection to the industry through fathers and grandfathers, the collective sense of struggle both within and outside of the home, as well as the role of the miners' union in fostering the cultural cohesion of mining and Welshness. Solidarity was fostered in men through the dangerous nature of their work, as well as their involvement within the miners' union. For women, who were not permitted to work underground, however, their sense of exploitation derived from the home. Women's unrecognized and unpaid labour in the domestic sphere contributed to their sense of disadvantage. Women also took part in extra-parliamentary methods of political engagement such as the *ceffyl pren*, the abuse of scabs, and as support group members and leaders who sustained their communities through the worst moments of the 1926 general strike, the Great Depression, and indeed, the 1984–85 strike. For women in the 1980s, the fusion of mining and Welshness formed the basis of their sense of national identity.

## Chapter Two:

### Thatcher's war against the miners was understood to be an attack on South Wales

“[Thatcher's] a menace, man. She doesn't like the Welsh.”

—Interviewee, Gorseinon, SWCC VID/170, 1984.

As explored in Chapter One, Welsh women associated their sense of Welshness with their position as working-class women in coal-dominated South Wales. As a result, any move by the central government to contract the industry was interpreted as an attack on Welsh identity itself. When Margaret Thatcher proposed to phase out the British coal industry through de-nationalization, women in South Wales perceived this to be a fundamental break between London and South Wales. Throughout the 1984–85 miners' strike, women's growing sense of alienation from national political institutions culminated in the understanding that the interests of London were ultimately antithetical to those of South Wales. Ambivalence towards the miners from the local and national arms of the Labour Party, the discriminatory application of the law, as well as police brutality and negative representation of the miners in the media, solidified women's impression that British institutions were hostile to South Wales, and that Wales had to stand up for itself.

Although previous governments, both Labour and Conservative, had been inhospitable to the miners, the post-war framework of nationalization was seldom seriously questioned until Margaret Thatcher was elected.<sup>108</sup> Thatcher began implementing her de-nationalization strategy, as outlined in the 1977 Ridley Report, following her massive electoral win in 1979. The

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<sup>108</sup> Harold Wilson's (Labour) colliery closure programme in the 1960s, as well as Edward Heath's (Conservative) reluctance to concede to NUM demands for wage increases, both represented governments who were hostile to the miners before Margaret Thatcher.

government began stockpiling coal, and by 1984 had reserved 57 million tonnes in preparation for a future dispute with the NUM.<sup>109</sup> The government also made good on its promise to hire non-union lorry drivers to ensure that coal transportation would continue over the course of a dispute, which would severely weaken the effectiveness of the strike.<sup>110</sup> The government diversified its energy sources, emphasizing the use of oil, gas, and nuclear power to decrease the reliance on British coal to further weaken the effectiveness of an NUM strike.<sup>111</sup> Thatcher's government also passed the 1980 Employment Act that made secondary picketing—picketing at any workplace not directly associated with the primary place of employment, in this case the colliery—illegal.<sup>112</sup> The Act also, as planned in the Ridley Report, deducted “assumed strike pay from the supplementary benefit, whether or not a striker was in receipt of such pay.”<sup>113</sup> The NUM was not financially capable of paying strike pay, so miners had to rely on the few state benefits to which their wives and children were entitled. The purpose of this change was to weaken the resolve of strikers to remain on strike by literally starving them in to capitulation. Finally, Thatcher's appointment of Ian MacGregor in September 1983 as the chairman of the National Coal Board solidified the perception that the Conservatives were hostile to South

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<sup>109</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 178.

<sup>110</sup> Women on picket lines described with fury the convoys of non-unionized lorry drivers crossing picket lines and transporting coal to and from collieries. Excerpt from interview with Neath and Dulais Valley Support Group, WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 37.

<sup>111</sup> The increased use of nuclear power was cited by the NUM, as well as the Wales Congress in Support of Striking Communities, as being not only detrimental to the coal industry, but also a threat to the safety of Britain due to the possibility of nuclear disaster. National Union of Mineworkers (South Wales Area) Annual Report for 1984-85, 38; Wales Congress in Support of Striking Communities, “Democracy, Thatcherism, and the Miners’ Strike,” pamphlet, Cardiff, 1984; Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 178.

<sup>112</sup> Secondary picketing was extremely successful in coal strikes in the 1970s, forcing the government to accept the demands of the miners. WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 11.

<sup>113</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 11.

Wales. In his stewardship of British Steel in 1983, MacGregor successfully cut employment by over half in order to boost profits in the industry.<sup>114</sup> South Wales miners expressed a very low opinion of MacGregor, as they felt that “MacGregor don’t do nothing for the mines except close them.”<sup>115</sup> Margaret Thatcher and Ian MacGregor together thus embodied the greatest threat to the South Wales coalfield since 1926. Government policy by 1984 was perceived to be explicitly hostile to South Wales because it jeopardized the livelihood and security of the working-class people who made up the majority of communities in the coalfield. Women felt that South Wales was being targeted because they were working-class, Welsh, and proud of it.

Women perceived Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government to be especially hostile to the South Wales coalfield. Indeed, one woman made this explicit: “I wonder what this country is doing to us. What Margaret Thatcher is doing to us. Because she’s doing it — her and MacGregor. I hope I never meet her face to face because I’d probably spend the rest of my life in jail.”<sup>116</sup> The notion that Westminster was targeting Wales *specifically* was felt across the coalfield. Her apparent disregard for the effects of pit closures on families and communities made “a mockery of [the] caring society that Mrs Thatcher continues to boast about.”<sup>117</sup> The community that was culturally, economically, and politically centred on the colliery defined South Wales, and women felt that Thatcher’s efforts to eliminate the coal industry threatened the very foundation of society in South Wales.

The Conservatives were not, however, the only political body seen as hostile to South Wales during the strike. The Labour Party, historically the political voice of the miners, was also

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<sup>114</sup> Penny Green, *The Enemy Without* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 34.

<sup>115</sup> Interviews of people in Gorseinon, SWCC VID/169, 1984.

<sup>116</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 32.

<sup>117</sup> Speech by Kath Evans at London-Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities, March 1985, South Wales Women’s Support Group Papers [File] 2.

felt to be inhospitable to the miners during the strike. Despite the Party leader, Neil Kinnock, expressing his support for the miners, there was a general sense among women in miners' support groups that Labour had left South Wales behind. When South Wales Miners' Library historians interviewed Betty, a support group leader in Gorseinon, a town in Swansea County, Betty disclosed that the support group had received help from West Glamorgan council through the set-up of donation boxes, but had not received the same level of assistance from local branches of Labour.<sup>118</sup> She expressed frustration, and said that "a lot of them [Labour] have sat on their backsides," and that communities have not been getting the support they expected from their members of Parliament.<sup>119</sup> Betty was not the only woman in South Wales to voice anger with local Labour MPs for failing to come to their constituencies' aid. A pamphlet published in December of 1984 identified how "Welsh Labour MPs have been more hesitant than most of their English colleagues in coming to the defence of the miners pickets."<sup>120</sup> Whether for fear of electoral consequences from backing the miners (who did not have the support of the general public) or for simply being unsympathetic to the strike, the sense that Welsh Labour MPs were ignoring the needs of their constituencies was felt deeply by women. The frustration "that a Party leader from a Valleys constituency can fail to give unambiguous support to a struggle which aims to preserve our communities from still greater unemployment and decay shows how the Party leadership has become divorced from the needs and aspirations of the Party's supporters."<sup>121</sup> Labour's hesitation to assist downtrodden Welsh communities was a difficult pill to swallow for those who had historically relied on Labour to speak for their interests on a

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<sup>118</sup> Interviews of people in Gorseinon, SWCC VID/170, 1984.

<sup>119</sup> Interviews of people in Gorseinon.

<sup>120</sup> South Wales Labour Briefing no. 10, "Women Lead the Miners' Fight," December, 1984, South Wales Women's Support Group Papers [File] 6.

<sup>121</sup> South Wales Labour Briefing, "Women Lead the Miners' Fight."

national level. Women interpreted the collapse of Labour's support as evidence of the antagonism of British political institutions to South Wales.

Hostility from national institutions contributed to Welsh women's sense that there was a growing chasm between London and South Wales. The feeling of separateness from the rest of the country in their struggle for the miners was exacerbated by the perception of the discriminatory application of the law towards Welsh miners and their women supporters. Women's belief that the law was being abused to further the aims of the government was heightened in July 1984 when the government sequestered all NUM funds in South Wales. Any bank accounts known or suspected to hold NUM funds in Wales, including funds of miners' support groups, were frozen.<sup>122</sup> This process of the sequestration of funds was recounted as one of the lowest moments for women during the strike, as their efforts to support the miners and to sustain their communities were effectively suspended.<sup>123</sup> Support groups could not get access to the money that funded crucial projects such as food parcel distribution. Many women felt that the government was manipulating legislation to bankrupt the NUM and undermine its ability, as well as the ability of South Wales support groups, to support the striking miners.<sup>124</sup> The sequestration of NUM funds in South Wales alone indicated that the government was targeting South Wales specifically out of the rest of the British coalfield, which was perceived by women to be an attempt to cripple the capacity of the coalfield to sustain itself.

Women's perception of hostility and differential application of the law by the government persisted in their experiences with the police. Women felt that they were being discriminated against by law enforcement because they were miners' wives. Mary Coombes

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<sup>122</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 222.

<sup>123</sup> Interview of Hefina Headon.

<sup>124</sup> Interview of Christine Powell.



from Maerdy, who was arrested for throwing an egg at a lorry, described her encounter with the police: “I said [to the police] I didn’t see why I should be treated differently to a farmer’s wife who had previously thrown an egg at Mrs. Thatcher, and that day nobody was charged, but when you’re a miner’s wife you’re charged with a breach of the peace and locked in a cell.”<sup>125</sup> She, as well as her fellow women comrades, were disgusted by the blatant discrimination against Welsh people by law enforcement.<sup>126</sup> One woman from Neath and Dulais Valley Support Group protesting lorry drivers crossing picket lines “did a V sign at one of the [lorry] drivers [transporting coal] and a policeman told me I could be taken away for that... But the drivers made signs like that at us — and no-one threatens to arrest them.”<sup>127</sup> Women felt that they were deliberately being treated differently by the police than other people because they were supporting the miners. Likewise, a woman at a demonstration in Porthcawl ahead of Thatcher’s visit described how she perceived the police to be blatantly discriminating against her and her fellow protesters:

We were waiting outside for Thatcher to arrive. I wanted to cross the road — the police wouldn’t let me. I said to them “Why am I not allowed to go across the road? Is it because I’m not a Tory? (There were a lot of very posh women across the road) Because I’m a socialist? A miners’ wife?” The policeman said “You need to be policed.”<sup>128</sup>

Women felt that they were being discriminated against because they were Welsh women. The sense of differential application of the law to miners and their supporters, as opposed to “scabs,” for example, who were in fact protected by the police, led to many Welsh women feeling that the state was actively working to suppress them. The discrimination women experienced at the hands

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<sup>125</sup> Interview of Coombes, SWCC AUD/588, 8 August 1985.

<sup>126</sup> Interviews of people in Gorseinon.

<sup>127</sup> Excerpt from interview of Neath and Dulais Valley Support Group, WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area) *Striking Back*, 37.

<sup>128</sup> Excerpt from interview of Neath and Dulais Valley Support Group, WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 38.

of the police throughout the strike based on their class and based on the fact that they were Welsh fuelled women's frustration with the state.

Women who supported the miners pointed to police violence on picket lines as the greatest example of the growing chasm between South Wales and Westminster. Women picketed alongside men *en masse* for the first time in 1984. For many women, going on picket lines gave them first-hand experience of the aggression of the state against Welsh miners in particular. Police violence represented the literal assault by the British state on Welsh miners. Miners, and their women supporters, who picketed at places like Orgreave described how they in particular were targeted by police who verbally and physically assaulted them, and how police would yell things like "get back to Wales, you Welsh bastards."<sup>129</sup> Women described how "our men had come back with all these stories of police violence and provocation, and we thought maybe it was an exaggeration. But we found that it wasn't."<sup>130</sup> Men who came home to their wives with ripped shirts, broken watches, shoes torn apart, bruises, marks, and cuts all over them gave women their first insight into the brutality of the state against the miners.<sup>131</sup> Many women recounted how they did not understand their husbands' anger until they went on picket lines or to rallies themselves.<sup>132</sup> One woman described a rally in Port Talbot:

There were about 150 [Welsh] women. Some were nervous, as you can understand. But once the lorries came [with coal]... the frustration inside you! My husband's been on picket duty every week, and I'd never understood the anger they feel. He was in Orgreave

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<sup>129</sup> Interview of Lodge Committee - Cwm, SWCC AUD/672, 8 August 1984.

<sup>130</sup> Excerpt from interview of Neath and Dulais Valley Support Group, WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 37.

<sup>131</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 38.

<sup>132</sup> Excerpt from interview of Neath and Dulais Valley Support Group, WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 37.

in T-shirt and shorts and when he came home he said he'd been petrified. He wasn't fighting for his job, he was fighting for his life.<sup>133</sup>

Women's anger with the state was founded not only on their husbands' experiences with the police, but also on their own. When women began going on picket lines a few months into the strike, their experiences were consistent with the stories their men had been telling them from the beginning. At a rally in London, women reported, "the police brutality was dreadful. There just aren't words to describe it... in one incident the police picked two Welsh miners out of the crowd and arrested them for nothing at all."<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, women also recounted how the police would attack them for their gender, shouting "go clean your houses," or accusing them of being a "bunch of lesbians."<sup>135</sup> Women on picket lines faced triple harassment: for being Welsh, for being working-class miners' wives, and for being women. Women were also on the receiving end of police assault, both verbal and physical. A woman from Bedws Support Group on the picket line at Orgreave reported that she "saw an inspector hit a woman in the mouth after she said something to him. He immediately disappeared behind police ranks and we have not seen him in the line since. No one could get his number."<sup>136</sup> The physical assault of Welsh men and women on picket lines and at rallies and demonstrations epitomized the attack launched by the Conservative government against the miners. Labour's continuing failure to come to the aid of the miners once again emerged in women's impression of the police: "none of the Labour-controlled police authorities in Wales have seriously challenged the role of the police in this dispute."<sup>137</sup> Women's experiences of police violence fuelled their "anger [towards the police,

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<sup>133</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 31.

<sup>134</sup> Miller, *You Can't Kill the Spirit*, 41.

<sup>135</sup> Interview of Sian James and Margaret Donovan.

<sup>136</sup> Excerpt from interview of Bedws Support Group, WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 83.

<sup>137</sup> South Wales Labour Briefing, "Women Lead the Miners' Fight."

and] reflect[ed] a growing rift between the police and the communities they work in.”<sup>138</sup> Women felt that the behaviour of the police, whether that was the Metropolitan police who were sent in from London or local law enforcement, would leave “wounds [on these communities that] will go on for a long time.”<sup>139</sup> Women’s disillusionment with the police reflected a larger disillusionment with the British state as a whole.

The pinnacle of the observed aggression of the government to South Wales was the treatment of Welsh miners in the British media. Women frequently referred to the media as one of their greatest sources of grief during the strike because of the terrible bias and outright lies they felt the news circulated about them. Women felt that newspapers, radio, and television programmes all gave “the impression... that... barbarian hordes of miners, with a beserk Welsh vanguard, swe[pt] down on an inadequately prepared police force: miners were intent on mayhem and bloody confrontation while the police were simply doing their duty and holding ‘the thin blue line.’”<sup>140</sup> Both men and women felt that their experiences on picket lines did not reflect what they read, watched, and heard in the media.<sup>141</sup> The representation of South Wales miners as the “berserk vanguard” was especially alarming for women who knew their husbands would never instigate violence on the picket line. Newspapers such as *The Western Mail*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Times of London* were unsympathetic to the miners throughout the strike. Reports of the picket line at Orgreave, the most violent picket of the dispute, regularly depicted miners in moments of violence, yet rarely recounted police brutality. For example, *The Times* reported on May 30 how “[s]tones, wooden fencing spars, a shovel and a bucket were

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<sup>138</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 38.

<sup>139</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 38.

<sup>140</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 92.

<sup>141</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 88.

among missiles hurled at police...”<sup>142</sup> The pickets were painted in a very unfavourable light and characterized as barbaric and uncivilized. An article published on June 2 describes how the police “were given a good hiding... [o]ne of them was kicked in the body and the face.”<sup>143</sup> Nothing, however, is written about the violent attacks on pickets by police.<sup>144</sup> Both articles were accompanied by photographs of injured police, but no images of injured pickets. The tone of each article suggested that the pickets were the source of the trouble, and that the police were only trying to maintain law and order.

Women described the immense frustration they felt at the media for its obvious bias towards the government. Many women described news programmes as “propaganda”:

[T]he more propaganda we heard on the telly about ourselves, the more angry and frustrated we became. Whenever scenes were described in which miners were said to be violent, my stomach used to turn over.... My own husband, who I knew for certain would never be on the side of violence, used to come home and be tempted to put his boot through the telly on occasions in response to the awful lies.<sup>145</sup>

The impression that the media was so blatantly against the miners and in support of the Conservative government simply solidified the notion that the government was not only failing to preserve and protect some of the most vulnerable communities in the coalfield (those in South Wales), but that Thatcher was indeed actively striving to bring them down. That fact, as it was understood by Welsh women involved in the strike, demonstrated once and for all that the central political institutions in London were insufficient to protect their communities. Women had to take matters into their own hands.

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<sup>142</sup> Paul Routledge, “Mounted police in action,” *Times* (London, England), 30 May 1984.

<sup>143</sup> Philip Webster, “Kinnick condemns violence on miners’ picket lines,” *Times* (London, England), 2 June 1984.

<sup>144</sup> Webster, “Kinnick condemns violence on miners’ picket lines.”

<sup>145</sup> Miller, *You Can’t Kill the Spirit*, 17.

The differential application of the law perceived by the South Wales miners and their communities suggested that the government was targeting them in order to further its own free market agenda. The perceived anti-Wales bias in the government convinced them that South Wales could not depend on the central government to further their interests. The discrimination by the political institutions of Britain, the government, the police, the media, and even the Labour Party, fuelled the perception that South Wales was increasingly alienated from the rest of Britain. Women felt that Conservative policy was specifically formulated to cripple South Wales. Additionally, women believed that the government was purposefully manipulating laws to hinder South Wales. The assault on South Wales communities by the police in a literal sense through physical violence and intimidation, as well as the characterization of Welsh miners in the media as the barbarous vanguard of a violent movement, convinced women that they had to stand up for themselves and for their communities.

### Chapter Three:

#### How communities came together in the valleys to preserve a “Welsh way of life”

“Community has a venerable place among Welsh values... *Cymdogaeth dda*, literally good neighbourliness, has always been a highly prized quality of Welsh rural and industrial communities, expressed in a warm concern for distressed members of the community.”

— Gwynfor Evans, *Fighting for Wales*

As outlined in Chapter Two, women in South Wales articulated their experience with government policy prior to and during the 1985–85 strike as indicative of a new contempt for South Wales in Westminster. The outright attack on the South Wales valleys perceived by women in those communities in the government’s restriction of social services, including unemployment benefits, as well as police brutality and discriminatory application of the law (as examined in Chapter Two) revealed a fracture between the interests of South Wales and London. The void left by the government in terms of the restriction of services and the antipathy of the government towards South Wales was filled by women who took it upon themselves to protect their communities through the establishment of grassroots welfare systems. Women in South Wales felt government policy towards the miners to be an attack on Wales as a whole, and as a result, women articulated their experiences with the government in national terms. Women strove to preserve a “Welsh way of life” through the establishment of a patchwork welfare state in the South Wales valleys. The 1984–85 strike heightened women’s sense of alienation from the government, but their struggle against an external foe indeed affirmed their sense of Welsh identity, and convinced them that their fight was one not just for their individual valleys, but for

all of Wales. Indeed, women felt that their political engagement in the strike unveiled a new era of politics in Wales that emphasized the need for all-Wales organizations of support.

In order to uncover the ways in which women understood their political engagement to be one in defense of nation, rather than of individual communities, one must address the definition of “community” under which Welsh women operated, and the ways that definition changed over the course of the strike. As mentioned in the introduction, Meg Allen’s study of women’s conception of “community” established that the term had three dimensions. The first was a territorial one where community referred to the physical village itself, as well as the surrounding valley. Women referred to “our village” and “this valley” when describing their communities.<sup>146</sup> The perimeter of the valley seemed to be the outermost boundary of women’s conception of their own physical communities. The second aspect of community lay within that territorial space where women attributed community to an emotive connection with neighbours, families, and friends.<sup>147</sup> The sense of shared socio-economic circumstance, as well as similar daily activities is “seen by residents as the same ‘communal life’” which contributed to the Welsh valleys’ character.<sup>148</sup> The day-to-day interactions with other members of a given community contributed to a mutual sense of belonging to a particular village and valley. The final aspect of women’s conception of community is expressed in an ideological sense, where a shared history and sense of solidarity based on that history contributes to members’ “mutual orientation to social action.”<sup>149</sup> As explored in Chapter One, women in South Wales had a deep connection to the history of the valleys through the familial connection to mining, through a sense of disadvantage and

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<sup>146</sup> Interview of Women’s Support Group - Merthyr Vale.

<sup>147</sup> Allen, “Women, ‘Community’ and the British Miners’ Strike of 1984–85,” 47.

<sup>148</sup> Allen, “Women, ‘Community’ and the British Miners’ Strike of 1984–85,” 47; Roberts, “Welsh Identity in a Former Mining Valley,” 121.

<sup>149</sup> Neuwirth, “A Weberian outline of a theory of community,” 149.



exploitation, and through the legacy of women's militancy and involvement in leftist politics, especially socialism. The ideological component to women's definition of "community" is the focus of this chapter because it is this very attribute that contributed so greatly to women's commitment to the strike. Women's "sense [of] shared identity and belonging" developed over the course of the strike, and was indeed strengthened by their increased activity in food distribution, at rallies, and on picket lines.<sup>150</sup> While women's connections to their communities and to their ideological convictions were strengthened across Great Britain, in South Wales this took on a national element. The coal industry was the largest industry in Wales, and the protection and development of that industry was in the interests of all people in Wales to ensure economic prosperity. Women's definition of community, therefore, expanded beyond the traditional parameters of the village and valley to include Wales as a whole.

Women in South Wales increasingly understood their fight in the 1984–85 miners' strike to be one for the nation of Wales. Bella Dicks and Joost Van Loon posit in their sociological study on the development of Welsh identity in South Wales that the constructions "community-as-nation and community-as-locality [go] through the same processes of spatial and temporal differentiation since the specification of *nation* always implies the *sub-* and *supra-*national."<sup>151</sup> Individual communities within the valleys were the sub-national localities. Great Britain was, therefore, the supra-national, as Wales was understood to be a nation within what was felt to be an increasingly exploitative union. Individual communities in South Wales were linked through their shared history, culture, and heritage, as well as the infrastructure established by the miners' union. Indeed, Morgan, in his study of Wales as a nation, claimed that the "real strength [of]

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<sup>150</sup> Allen, "Women, 'Community' and the British Miners' Strike of 1984–85," 47.

<sup>151</sup> Bella Dicks and Joost Van Loon, "Territoriality and Heritage in South Wales: Space, Time and Imagined Communities" *Nation, Identity, and Social Theory*, 208-9.

Wales lies in the fact that [it is] a nation of strong and individualistic communities.”<sup>152</sup> Valley communities were bound together as one nation by their shared struggle against an external enemy, Westminster. Welsh women were the vanguard of this defense in their establishment of grassroots organizations, which strove to protect their communities, and indeed all communities in Wales, from the worst effects of Thatcherism.

The threat to South Wales posed by Thatcher’s government was not a new one. In fact, the threat of pit closure was one with which the South Wales coalfield was intimately familiar. The effects of mass unemployment in South Wales during the Great Depression devastated the valleys, as workers who could not find employment left the valleys for England. The “mass exodus” of the valleys in the 1930s ravaged the South Wales coalfield and crippled the valleys as an industrial and political force.<sup>153</sup> Not everyone, however, could afford to move across the border to England. Those who remained in economically depressed South Wales had no choice but to go on the dole and accept state benefits.<sup>154</sup> In the 1960s, the National Coal Board under Wilson introduced a “super pit policy,” which intended to “concentrate resources in fewer and bigger collieries.”<sup>155</sup> These super pits included Cynheidre, Abernant, as well as Pentreclwydau, Blaengwrach, and Cwmgwili, as these collieries were situated in regions with large reserves of special quality coal types.<sup>156</sup> While the super pit policy brought substantial investment to the South Wales coalfield, the closure of smaller collieries had unforeseen effects on community life. Men whose local colliery was closed were transferred to nearby “super pits”; although these

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<sup>152</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, “Rebirth of a Nation - Wales 1880–1890,” in *The National Question Again*, 5.

<sup>153</sup> Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities, “Wales and the Miners’ Strike — The NUM Fights for Wales,” pamphlet, 1984.

<sup>154</sup> Interviews of people in Gorseinon.

<sup>155</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 58.

<sup>156</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 59.

men were still employed, their home village was negatively affected as skilled work was lost. Concurrently, the communities receiving said workers were devastated, as skilled workers from those same communities could not get jobs.<sup>157</sup> The lack of other industries meant that once a colliery was closed, jobs were lost, and skilled workers were either left to transfer to another pit or to go on the dole.

The social implications of pit closures threatened daily life in mining villages in South Wales by extinguishing community spirit. High rates of unemployment resulted in increased rates of physical and mental illness, suicide, domestic violence, and divorce.<sup>158</sup> Village amenities such as shops, bakeries, cafes, and pubs could not remain open after the primary employer, the colliery, was closed. The notion that “the closure of the pit finished the community” was one that rang true in South Wales.<sup>159</sup> The loss of community spirit due to pit closure was frequently lamented by women in the valleys.<sup>160</sup> The loss of a sense of community was devastating for women in South Wales because it meant the loss of a sense of belonging. Without a union of which women could be a part, the village community was the only avenue through which women could feel connected to one another. Christine Powell described the tragedy of pit closure: “I remember all the shops there used to be in the village. The pubs would be full on payday. And you begin to realize what you mean by the death of the village, and about the pits being the mother of the village.”<sup>161</sup> After a pit closed, women in the community did not have the same sense of connection they had before. People moved away, shops and pubs closed, and family

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<sup>157</sup> Interview of Peter Evans.

<sup>158</sup> Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities, “Wales and the Miners’ Strike — The NUM Fights for Wales,” pamphlet, 1984.

<sup>159</sup> Interview of Rees Davies.

<sup>160</sup> Interview of Christine Powell.

<sup>161</sup> Interview of Christine Powell.

units broke down due to the strains of unemployment. Kath Evans, in her speech to the London-Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities, claimed that women bore the greatest burden of unemployment, as they had to keep their families together.<sup>162</sup> One of women's greatest concerns about pit closure was the lack of employment opportunities for their children, as without the mines "there's nothing for them in these valleys."<sup>163</sup> The loss of the pit killed any future for youth within the boundaries of the valley. Pit closure in South Wales meant more than just the loss of jobs. The closure of the colliery guaranteed the loss of a sense of community, and with it the loss of a sense of connection and belonging.

The threat of pit closure has been present in South Wales since 1964, and the pernicious effects of closures on community life were known to numerous communities well before 1984. Many villages had lost their collieries decades before. Hefina Headon from Seven Sisters asked her husband in March 1984, when the strike began, "why are you coming out to strike now? It's too late! [Seven Sisters is] dead anyway. What's in Seven Sisters today? What's been in Seven Sisters for the last twenty years?"<sup>164</sup> Seven Sisters, like dozens of other pit communities, had already been devastated by pit closures in the 1960s. Their collieries were rusting or demolished, and their lodge banners were folded away or in storage at the South Wales Miners' Library for posterity. What community was there to defend in 1984? A number of scholars, including Allen, Ali, and Beddoe, have all previously contended that the communities imagined by women in South Wales had not truly existed since the 1920s. The defeat in the 1926 general strike, as well as the difficult years of the Great Depression, meant that many of the historic coalfield communities were long since erased. So what were women defending in 1984? Was it the

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<sup>162</sup> Speech by Kath Evans at London-Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities.

<sup>163</sup> Interview of Women's Support Group - Merthyr Vale.

<sup>164</sup> Interview of Hefina Headon.

imagined communities of South Wales' past? If so, why would women want to defend those communities, which were heavily male dominated and extremely traditional? Ali asks this very question in her study of women in the miners' strike. She counter-argues:

the view that sees the mining culture as oppressive to women comes from outsiders, especially middle-class feminists. Women within these communities do not perceive themselves to be oppressed. They take comfort in the closeness of the community, for they know that such unity derives from coal-mining life.<sup>165</sup>

Ali contends that the mining communities of years past were not understood by women to be oppressive, but were reflections of the values held by those communities: unity, solidarity, and mutual aid. What Ali and other scholars fail to emphasize, however, is that those values, unity, solidarity, and the principle of mutual aid were still held in high esteem by women from South Wales, even if their village colliery had been closed decades before. The values of unity and solidarity informed women's conceptions of the "Welsh way of life," and when the strike began in March 1984, it was those values that women sought to preserve. Their struggle was not "just the miners' fight. It was now a fight almost to the death – the death of our way of life."<sup>166</sup> For many women, being Welsh meant being working-class and socialist. Women's struggle for their communities was a fight for a Welsh way of life based on those values. Women fighting for their communities articulated their struggle as one for survival: survival of the coal industry, of their communities, and of their way of life.<sup>167</sup> Women felt that the strike in 1984 was their last chance to defend their communities against an enemy that was hellbent on seeing their disappearance.

The disappearance of South Wales communities began with the deconstruction of the welfare state, which had been a major win for the socialist communities of South Wales.

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<sup>165</sup> Ali, "The Coal War," 97.

<sup>166</sup> Miller, *You Can't Kill the Spirit*, 21.

<sup>167</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 32.

Thatcher viciously opposed the welfare state, and upon her election, began dismantling the system of social security which enabled women's ability to manage household incomes and maximize the resources of a contracting welfare system. Women in South Wales perceived Thatcher's attack on social security to be an attempt to starve striking communities into capitulation. One of the most egregious avenues through which women understood Thatcher to be doing so was by way of the 1980 Employment Act. As outlined in Chapter Two, the 1980 Employment Act restricted welfare benefits to striking miners so that "striking miners and their dependents were... forced to rely on the DHSS for the very limited financial support it offered... [as] no striking miner was entitled to claim benefits — only dependents of striking workers could claim [benefits]."<sup>168</sup> The strike pay the union was required to pay striking miners was never paid because the NUM simply could not afford it. The denial of benefits to striking miners disproportionately affected South Wales coalfield communities because the National Coal Board was the primary employer. Entire villages of men were out of work during the strike simply because there was no other industry in the South Wales valleys. Mining families tended to rely on single incomes, which further exacerbated the lack of strike pay.<sup>169</sup> Where benefits could be claimed, the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) proved to be extremely unhelpful. Many accounts of Welsh families at local DHSS offices describe how employees purposefully misled miners' families by giving them the wrong information and the wrong forms, resulting in delays in receiving any benefits.<sup>170</sup> Many families never received the benefits to which they were entitled. The DHSS appeared to be making the process of acquiring social security particularly difficult for miners and their families. Women felt that DHSS staff implied

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<sup>168</sup> Green, *The Enemy Without*, 120.

<sup>169</sup> Miller, *You Can't Kill the Spirit*, 17.

<sup>170</sup> Interview of Lodge Committee - Deep Navigation and Merthyr Vale Pits.

that the problems miners and their families faced were self-induced, and that the men could go back to work at any time.<sup>171</sup> Numerous families were forced into poverty due to the inaccessibility of social security. The blatant neglect by and antagonism of the government meant to communities in these Valleys that the central government could not be relied upon for basic state amenities, let alone to foster prosperity.

The perceived attempt by the government to “starve the miners back to work” took a significant toll on social and family life in South Wales. Women remarked that it was especially difficult for the men of the village to go to the DHSS to accept social security. Mining communities were heavily male-dominated, and men were accustomed to being the sole breadwinner of the family. Many miners had supported their families for years, “and now for the first time they have to go cap in hand to the social security. They hate having to do it, and all they get when they get there is officialdom, no real help.”<sup>172</sup> The process of having to go to the DHSS for benefits, which men could not receive anyways as striking workers, only to be “given the run-around” by the staff demoralized men and their families. Women bore the brunt of the struggle with the DHSS, as women were responsible for keeping families together and looking after the home. To supplement the few benefits that families could claim, many women in South Wales took badly paid part-time jobs.<sup>173</sup> For some families, “the only money we had coming in was the money that I earned with my part-time job, which amounted to under thirty pounds a week, to keep two adults, two young boys, two dogs, a ferret, and a spider in the bath.”<sup>174</sup>

Families had no choice but to give up the few luxuries they had been able to afford: television,

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<sup>171</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 33.

<sup>172</sup> Interview of Women’s Support Group - Neath and Dulais Valley, and Ystalyfera, SWCC AUD/583, 1 August 1984.

<sup>173</sup> Speech by Kath Evans at London-Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities.

<sup>174</sup> Miller, *You Can’t Kill the Spirit*, 17.

gas, and electricity. Children had to go without new clothes, shoes, and toys. While the efforts by the government to starve the miners back to work certainly took their toll on individual families, the government was ultimately unsuccessful in South Wales. The enforced poverty did not drive the miners back to work, but instead led to the mobilization of Welsh women.

Women's sense of exploitation by the government affirmed their sense of Welshness, and spurred them to mobilize in ways not seen since 1926. While many women who were politically engaged during the strike were active before the strike in local politics, there were a great number of women who felt that 1984 was a moment of political awakening. The old ideals of socialism, born in the harsh years of the 1920s and 1930s, were revived in light of the hostility from the Conservative government. Even women who were already members of the Labour Party felt that their understanding of socialism was strengthened over the course of the strike.<sup>175</sup> As one woman from the Neath and Dulais Valley Support Group put it, "I thought I was a socialist before. Now I know what socialism is – it's a whole way of life and we were living it in our valley right now."<sup>176</sup> The dismantling of the welfare state had very personal implications for Welsh women in South Wales, as these cuts indicated that the Conservatives were gutting the welfare system to make way for privatization at the expense of working-class people. Women in South Wales, who had historical experiences with exploitation and disadvantage, sprang to action in defense of the working-class people of the South Wales valleys.

Through the creation of miners' support groups, women established patchwork welfare systems in the void left by Thatcher's decimation of the welfare state. These groups "raised funds, ran food centres and soup kitchens, addressed public meetings throughout Britain and

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<sup>175</sup> Interview of Christine Powell.

<sup>176</sup> Excerpt from Interview of Neath and Dulais Valley Support Group, WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 33.



stood alongside men on the picket lines.”<sup>177</sup> The Welsh Campaign for Civil and Political Liberties estimated in 1985 that, together with the NUM strike committees at each miners’ lodge, the women’s support groups supported over 100,000 people in the South Wales valleys.<sup>178</sup> Where the government had failed to provide basic state amenities, women’s support groups succeeded in providing the material necessities for miners and their families including food, clothes, and children’s toys, as well as boosting morale in depressed communities. Food distribution was the primary task adopted by support groups, as access to food could make or break union loyalty. Men, who could not provide for their families, or worse, for themselves, were more likely to break the strike. When Betty, the leader of the support group in Gorseinon, was interviewed in 1984, she explained that single miners were the most likely to go back to work, as they had no form of income whatsoever, whereas married miners could rely on benefits received by their wives, as well as on the income from their wives’ part-time jobs.<sup>179</sup> Food collection and distribution was conducted entirely on a voluntary basis by women’s groups. Women organized weekly fundraisers such as jumble sales and raffles to support their efforts. Groups collected donations from communities within the valleys, as well as from places like London, and even from international sympathizers. Local businesses also assisted women in their efforts. Hefina Headon described how the local baker in Seven Sisters lowered the price of bread from 45p to 32p, which helped women immensely in being able to afford to put together food parcels.<sup>180</sup> Maerdy Lodge distributed 700 food parcels a week throughout the entire valley.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, “any family short of food [in Maerdy] “could go to the miners’ welfare institute and get

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<sup>177</sup> Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 164-5.

<sup>178</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 35.

<sup>179</sup> Interview of David Donovan, SWCC AUD/547, 10 April 1986.

<sup>180</sup> Interview of Women’s Support Group - Neath and Dulais Valley, and Ystalyfera.

<sup>181</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 34.

another food parcel. [The women] try to ensure that no one suffers exceptional hardship if they can find a way to help.”<sup>182</sup> Likewise, Neath and Dulais Valleys distributed 1,000 parcels a week.<sup>183</sup> The most extensive food distribution programme was in Gwent, where the support group collected £10,000 weekly and delivered 5000 parcels across fourteen NUM areas.<sup>184</sup> The collection and distribution of food filled in the gap left by the restrictions to strike pay and the difficulty people experienced in claiming social security. Women’s efforts in South Wales sustained hundreds of families in the course of the strike. Christine Powell, Yvonne Brown, Edwinda Roberts, Sheila Battenbough from the Neath and Dulais Valleys Support Group described how “we get a lot of support from the pensioners around here. They’re always giving what they can... We’ve had letters from people who were on strike in 1926 and live in Australia now — and they’ve sent us donations. It’s overwhelming.”<sup>185</sup> The donations from pensioners who were on strike in 1926 were especially moving for women. It connected their current sense of struggle with the struggle of miners, and indeed of women, past who fought against governments which sought to incapacitate them. The struggle in 1984 was understood to be the same as in 1926, for both were fights for survival.

While the aforementioned methods of community engagement by women were essential to the continuation of the strike within South Wales, women felt that they needed to do more to defend their communities. Following in the footsteps of their politically radical foremothers, women picketed alongside men, occupied pithead baths, organized rallies, and made speeches advocating for the miners, the Labour movement, and for Wales in general. Despite initial

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<sup>182</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 35.

<sup>183</sup> Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 165.

<sup>184</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 35.

<sup>185</sup> Interview of Women’s Support Group - Neath and Dulais Valley, and Ystalyfera.

concerns over the presence of women in public political activity, many women got out from “behind the kitchen sink” and remained out for the duration of the strike.<sup>186</sup> Just as the Welsh miners were in the vanguard of the strike, Welsh women too were at the forefront in support of the miners. As discussed in Chapter Two, women picketed alongside men, but they also organized their own protests. Women from Neath and Dulais Valleys Support Group occupied Cynheidre baths twice, as well as standing at the entrance to Cynheidre to prevent men from attempting to return to work.<sup>187</sup> Hefina Headon, one of the women who occupied the baths, discussed how men enjoyed having women with them on picket lines because it cemented their resolve to confront the government.<sup>188</sup> Women also organized their own meetings and rallies, as well as attending rallies elsewhere in the country. For instance, “some women from the [South Wales] support groups have travelled all over Wales, England and Scotland to speak at public meetings, and make contact with other women from mining communities.”<sup>189</sup> Women’s political engagement, as well as the leadership roles they took on, fundamentally shifted the ways in which they understood ideas about community, struggle, and solidarity. Their connection with women from across the coalfield fostered a sense of belonging not just to one community or to one valley, but to all of Wales.

The sense of connection with women from other mining communities expanded women’s conceptions of community to include Wales as a whole. Women in Abertillery, for instance, “organized a huge and highly successful rally in July [1984], and in the same week saw the first

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<sup>186</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 32.

<sup>187</sup> Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 165; Interview with Hefina Headon.

<sup>188</sup> Interview of Hefina Headon.

<sup>189</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 36.

mass women's picket at Port Talbot steelworks."<sup>190</sup> Women spoke at rallies and advocated for their villages, their valleys, and indeed the entire nation of Wales. Women expressed that their political engagement was, for them, a new era of politics characterized by a recognition that the central government had failed South Wales, and that women had to stand up for Wales as a whole.

The expansion of the concept of community was most clearly expressed in the constitution of the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities, which stated "that the survival and expansion of the coal industry in Wales is one sure way of defending *all* Welsh communities — for without industry there is no future for Wales."<sup>191</sup> Women spearheaded the creation of the Wales Congress by involving themselves in support groups and other organizations dedicated to assisting mining communities. Their fierce defense of the "Welsh way of life" "changed the whole nature of politics in Wales."<sup>192</sup> Their historic advocacy for the communities of South Wales represented one of the earliest forms of an all-Wales coalition in the second half of the twentieth century. The strike drew cultural connections for women in Wales which had not been present since the early twentieth century. The Welsh language, for example, which for much of English monoglot South Wales was lost in the first few decades of the century, was reinvigorated by many women during the strike. Women such as Christine Powell, who themselves were not fluent Welsh-speakers, spoke to Welsh-speaking audiences. Despite her nerves, Powell delivered her speech in Welsh, and men conversed with her in Welsh

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<sup>190</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 36; Interview of Hefina Headon.

<sup>191</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 13-14.

<sup>192</sup> WCCPL and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back*, 47.

after as if it was her native tongue, because her speech had been so good and her Welsh equally excellent.<sup>193</sup> Kim Powells asserted in 1985:

In South Wales we also discovered something else: that we are part of a real nation which extends northwards beyond the coalfield, into the mountains of Powys, Dyfed, and Gwynedd. For the first time since the industrial revolution in Wales, the two halves of the nation came together in mutual support... old differences of attitude and accent withered and out of it grew the most important “formal” political organization to emerge during the course of the strike —the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities.<sup>194</sup>

The Wales Congress, which was made up of women’s support groups, local authorities, the Wales Trade Union Congress, and Welsh churches formed a broad anti-Thatcher alliance that stood to defend all of Wales against the Conservative onslaught.<sup>195</sup> The constitution of this body declared that “this All-Wales Confederence will be devoted to discussing the future development of the Wales Congress and to considering the best way of mobilizing resistance to further attacks on our industry and our communities by the present government.”<sup>196</sup> The Congress solidified the work women’s support groups had done, and encouraged support groups to formulate plans for their own communities and assist in submitting them to the local and central governments.<sup>197</sup> The connection to the rest of Wales that women forged during the strike was based on the understanding that they were all fighting for the national community of Wales.

Women’s political engagement during the 1984–85 strike affirmed women’s sense of Welshness through their struggle against a hostile Conservative government. The perceived threat of Margaret Thatcher’s government was primarily in the dismantling of the welfare state,

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<sup>193</sup> Interview of Christine Powell.

<sup>194</sup> Kim Howells, “Stopping Out: The Birth of a New Kind of Politics” in *Digging Deeper: Issues in the Miners’ Strike*, ed. Huw Beynon (London: Verso, 1985), 146.

<sup>195</sup> Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities, “Proposed Steering Head Committee - Constitution” 1 June 1985.

<sup>196</sup> Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities, “Proposed Steering Head Committee - Constitution.”

<sup>197</sup> Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities, “Proposed Steering Head Committee - Constitution.”

which had historically provided for South Wales communities that were predominantly working class. The deduction of strike pay, as well as the restriction of access to social security, meant that families throughout the coalfield had very little money with which to sustain themselves. Welsh women mobilized to fill the void left by the government to form an “alternative welfare state” in the coalfield that supplied thousands of people with food, clothes, as well as boosted morale to help sustain the strike. Women also engaged in unprecedented political activity, such as joining men on picket lines, organizing rallies, and making speeches both at home and internationally. The sense that women were fighting not just for their communities, but for all of Wales, was validated in the foundation of the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities. The Congress encapsulated all the organizations that strove to defend their communities against the worst effects of Thatcherism. Women’s engagement in the 1984–85 strike was the first moment in which women articulated their struggle in national terms, but it was certainly not the last.

## Conclusion

The 1984–85 miners’ strike affirmed many women’s sense of Welsh identity, as the perceived hostility of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government confirmed an external sense of exploitation from Westminster. The political momentum initiated by women during the strike in their defense of Wales continued after the strike concluded.

The 1984–85 miners’ strike ended on March 3, 1985, when the South Wales Area called for a return to work after nearly a year of bitter struggle. Accompanied by lodge banners and brass bands, miners across Britain returned to their collieries only to witness, over the next two decades, the total elimination of the industry. The 1985 Coal Act officially relinquished the role of the government as “guardian” of the industry, and allowed for the privatization of British coal.<sup>198</sup> The coal industry was swiftly contracted, and within ten months Aberpergwm, St. John’s, Garw, Penrhiwceiber, Bedws, Celynen South, Celynen North, Abertillery, New Mine, Blaenserchan collieries in South Wales were closed.<sup>199</sup> 20,000 miners worked in South Wales before 1984, and by 1994 only one deep mine, Tower colliery, was left in operation in the coalfield.<sup>200</sup> Francis recounted how “what was then experienced [following the end of the strike] was the disappearance of coal mining, the disappearance of work – and skilled work – from large parts of South Wales.”<sup>201</sup> Some parts of the coalfield saw a significant jump in unemployment from 15 to 25 percent.<sup>202</sup> The relationship between miners and management worsened as the

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<sup>198</sup> South Wales Area (NUM), South Wales Area Council Annual Conference Agenda and Annual Report for 1984–1986, 46.

<sup>199</sup> South Wales Area (NUM), South Wales Area Council Annual Conference Agenda and Annual Report for 1984–1986, 46.

<sup>200</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 250.

<sup>201</sup> Francis, *History on Our Side*, 91.

<sup>202</sup> Curtis, *The South Wales Miners*, 251.

National Union of Mineworkers no longer had the power it once had as a result of its defeat, and the union effectively disappeared in the late 1980s and 1990s. For many in South Wales the “biggest loss of the strike is the loss of the union. There isn’t a National Union of Mineworkers anymore.”<sup>203</sup> Communities withered as the last of the pits closed, unemployment rose, and the economic outlook of Wales looked bleak. The loss of the union also dealt a critical blow to South Wales, both politically and culturally, due to the union’s historic role in promoting Welsh culture.

Despite the catastrophic failure of the strike to prevent pit closures, there was a sense in South Wales that “everybody can hold their head up [for getting involved in the strike].”<sup>204</sup> South Wales was the only coalfield where the percentage of strikebreakers was in the single digits. Women held a venerable place in South Wales for their involvement in the strike because it was their efforts that sustained it for so long. Indeed, Kath Evans said as much in her speech to the London-Wales Congress in 1985:

It has been recognized by the NUM that they could not have held out for so long had it not been for the backing the women gave to the strike. For many years the women in the mining communities have watched pit closures and have seen the run-down of the communities that follows.<sup>205</sup>

Women played a vital part in continuing the strike in South Wales, for it was their activity that kept miners and their families fed, their children clothed, and morale maintained in valley communities.

The political momentum initiated by women during the strike continued into the following decades. Kim Powells, in his account of the political meaning of the dispute, argued that as a result of the strike Wales had become a new kind of political community:

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<sup>203</sup> Interview of Hefina Headon and Christine Powell.

<sup>204</sup> Interview of Christine Powell.

<sup>205</sup> Speech by Kath Evans at London-Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities.



The coalfield had developed a new collective spirit which revived community life and re-awoke in ordinary people the understanding that it was possible to take the first, concrete steps towards creating a more humanitarian and socialist society now, in the dreary midst of Thatcherism, and that it was idiotic to assume that such steps were only possible after some special kind of electoral victory or a triumph on the barricades.<sup>206</sup>

Women's groups continued to operate in the late 1980s as networks of support. The connections made between women within their own communities, and between communities across South Wales, cemented a sense of solidarity and unity that persisted well after the strike ended.

Women's support groups continued the same kinds of activities they had during the strike — fundraising, jumble sales, coffee mornings, community picnics — which all served to assist people who struggled when the strike ended, as well as to boost community morale.<sup>207</sup>

Women's involvement in political life, however, also grew in the years following the end of the strike. The skills and confidence women gained during their roles as organizers, leaders, and community delegates meant that many women indeed refused to "return to the kitchen sink," and instead pursued engagements outside of the home. Women enrolled in university courses to earn their degrees, as well as attended workshops such as the DOVE workshop in Banwen, Neath, which allowed women to further their education in part-time courses, as well as improve and develop the skills, such as public speaking, that they had developed during the strike.<sup>208</sup> Some women, such as Siân James, even ran for public office.<sup>209</sup> Women's roles in the strike paved the way for them to expand their political activity.

Women's expanding role in political positions gave them greater opportunities to advocate for their communities, both individual and national. Leighton Andrews argued that "the

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<sup>206</sup> Powells, "Stopping Out," 146.

<sup>207</sup> Interview of Women's Support Group - Merthyr Vale.

<sup>208</sup> Francis, *History on Our Side*, 105.

<sup>209</sup> James was elected to the House of Commons as a Labour MP for Swansea East in 2005, and she served in parliament until 2010. "Meet the MP: Sian James." BBC News. August 04, 2005.

specific characteristics of the miners' strike within Wales" contributed to the maintenance of a distinct concept of Wales as a nation, which formed the foundation of devolution.<sup>210</sup> The successful bid for devolution in 1997, which granted Wales its own parliament in Cardiff Bay, was the successful first step towards increased autonomy for Wales. Unlike in Westminster, where the percentage of female MPs was still low, significant numbers of women were elected to the National Assembly in 1999.<sup>211</sup> Some scholars have suggested that the achievement of devolution in Wales would not have been possible without the work of women during the 1984–85 miners' strike.<sup>212</sup> This thesis, however, is the first academic work to analyze at length the connection between Welsh women's fight during the 1984–85 miners' strike and the achievement of devolution. Women's belief that their communities deserved better than the whims of the central government, especially a government for which Wales did not vote, fuelled their political engagement during the strike.<sup>213</sup> Women's struggle against a government that was perceived to be explicitly hostile to them convinced many women that their struggle was one not for the survival of one village or valley, but for the nation of Wales as a whole.

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<sup>210</sup> Andrews, *Wales Says Yes*, 32.

<sup>211</sup> Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows*, 183.

<sup>212</sup> Andrews, *Wales Says Yes*, 32.

<sup>213</sup> Despite the Conservative majority in the House of Commons, most Welsh constituencies voted Labour. Andrews, *Wales Says Yes*, 53.

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