

Granville Williams (ed) 2009, Shafted: The Media, The Miners' Strike and The Aftermath.

The Fifth-Estate-Online, October 2009

Published by The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom 174 pages ISBN: 97818940051. £9.99. (Also available online from www.cpbf.org.uk).

'Mrs Thatcher launched a major counter-revolution against democracy when she came to power and she did it by attacking the three pillars of the labour movement'.

In his forward to *Shafted: The Media, The Miners' Strike and the Aftermath*, Tony Benn defines the 1984/85 strike as crucial to the Thatcher government's attack on the trade union movement as a whole. Reflecting on the events of twenty five years ago, Granville Williams' edited study recreates a sense of Britain at the crossroads during the 1980s, caught between its most traditional industries rooted in the heartlands of its coal mining communities in the North, South Wales and Scotland, and the shift towards the post industrial landscape which shaped much of the subsequent impetus of Thatcherism and Blairism.

Looking back at the Miners' strike, the single most defining conflict of Thatcherite Britain, at least in the sphere of domestic policy, it is tempting to remember it as the gladiatorial clash between Thatcher, Scargill and one or two other leading protagonists. The author's timely retrospective, assisted by the insights of a range of contributors from differing perspectives, provides a deeper analysis of the strike and its seminal moments; from 'The Battle of Orgreave' to the role played by women in supporting their broken communities. Furthermore, it locates the dispute in both its contemporary context and reflects upon its enduring legacy; economic, political, cultural and social. The heartbeat of the book is the compassion and empathy it reveals for the mining communities of the United Kingdom, and how the economic and social fabric of these communities was ripped apart, not only by the repressive brutality of policing strategy during the strike itself, alluded to by several eye-witnesses, but also by their decline into derelict wastelands in the aftermath of the conflict. Scargill himself emerges vindicated both on the government's policy regarding pit closures, denied at the time of the strike and in perceiving the dispute as a wider attack on the working class itself, as 'the enemy within' the miners were in the first line of this concentration. Reading through the book, one cannot help to be astonished at how much Britain has changed during the intervening twenty five years, though needless to say so much of this change can be described as positive. Pivotal to *Shafted* is the critical role played by the Mass Media during the yearlong strike, raising still relevant questions pertaining to the relationship between the media and democracy itself.

Media selectivity, bias, distortion and manipulation were all intrinsic to how the strike was portrayed in the vast majority of press and television coverage, with a slavishly pro-Thatcherite stance being adopted by all the national press, with the exception of *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mirror* and *The Morning Star*. Moreover, as former BBC Correspondent Nick Jones suggests, television and radio coverage revealed an equally entrenched narrative aimed at demonising and vilifying 'the enemy within'. Within this context, journalists were effectively reduced to the role of cheerleaders for the return to work. Given what has happened since with regard to media coverage of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, there is little room for either confidence or optimism in suggesting that the British Mass Media has learnt many lessons or is capable of fulfilling any credible role of balance, impartiality and objectivity. Indeed, BBC coverage of the pivotal mediated construction of the strike, the violent confrontation at Orgreave, provides a salutary testimony to those concerned about media values and independence. As Jones subsequently recognised, and Bailey highlights, the incident was the most notorious example of media bias, with the BBC abandoning any sense of public service ethos through its blatant misrepresentation of the confrontation in misleadingly portraying the miners as the aggressors. What emerges from *Shafted* is a realisation that media manifestations merely served to reinforce the prevalent imbalance with respect to media resources and access between the NCB and the NUM.

So what then are the legacies, the aftermath of the strike, apart from the enduring bitterness and sense of social collapse which now pervades once proud, now desolate communities? Patricia Holland asserts that the key after-memory of the dispute has been promoted and consolidated by the plethora of documentaries, films and retrospectives which have emerged since. Though tinged with certain nostalgia, films such as 'Brassed Off' (1996), 'Full Monty' (1997) and 'Billy Elliot' (2000) fused the collapse of heavy industry against personal success in the entertainment business, creating a potent set of metaphors for contemporary Britain. These, allied to the iconography of the strike revealed in the quite stunning photography which illustrates the book, provide a diversity of scope in locating the events of 1984/85 within an historical and social landscape.

Williams also brings home the sense that although the events of twenty five years ago may well seem like echoes of a distant era, the question of Britain's energy resources has a contemporary resonance. Although the reference to the 124th Durham Miners' Gala is rather poignantly celebrated, and Coal is perceived as very much the energy source of a bygone age in the United Kingdom (though pointedly not in a global sense), the sight of Scargill confronting the Climate Change lobby as recently as 2008, stubbornly presenting the case for 'Clean Coal' as a viable solution to future energy needs, gives some continuity in that Coal links past and future within the vortex of Britain's industrial

heritage.

Reading through the collection of thoughts and retrospectives at the core of *Shafted* the book is half-tribute, half-polemic. There are many recollections and reappraisals of the strike, though no attempt at balance, no attempt to present the reflections of the Thatcher Government or the NCB. This is clearly not the author's motive or intention. The clue is surely in the book's title; that the miners, and their courageous and noble struggle to protect a whole way of life were indeed shafted by a conspiracy between the government, the police and the NCB, aided by a pliant, colluding media shifting public opinion and perception against the miners. The misuse and abuse of media power and influence is *Shafted's* most telling theme. When these factors combine, when state violence is used to suppress fundamental democratic freedoms, Bailey and Petley aptly raise the grim spectre of the Orwellian 1984 nightmare 'the face will always be there to be stamped upon; the heretic, the enemy of society, will always be there, so that he can be defeated and humiliated over again'.

The Miner's Strike may well have resulted in the defeat of the miners, followed by the litany of pit closures. In its best moments, *Shafted* brings you back to the essence of what the struggle was all about, the fight to protect the jobs and lives of working people.

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