

# HEROIC STORY

## WILLIAM GALLACHER

I HAVE, in recent times, read books dealing with the March of History, as it has expressed itself in different parts of the world. Great books, many of them, and here, added to their number, and taking its place amongst the best, is the *History of The Scottish Miners*,\* the third historical work about miners in Britain written by R. Page Arnot. Of this volume I would say that, while it deals with a particular industry, it epitomises in general the long bitter struggles of the working class from semi-serfdom to their present powerful position in face of a decaying capitalism.

Coal had an early start in Scotland. Take the opening lines:

Coal, the main source of heat and light and power in nearly every country, has been dug in Scotland for years beyond reckoning. Eighteen hundred years ago the Roman army of occupation between Forth and Clyde were using coal.

From then on till the twelfth century there are no discoverable records of its use but in that century

We get on durable parchment the record of *carbonaria*, or as they are called in Acts of Parliament, the coal-heughs. (Page 6.)

Having been introduced to coal we are then introduced to the coal-getter—the miner. By Act of Parliament (Scottish) he was, with his children, condemned to serfdom. It is an appalling story as set out from official and semi-official records. The author quotes Lord Henry Cockburn who remarks, ‘Wives, daughters and sons went on from generation to generation under the system which was the family doom’.

The story of the ruthless exploitation of women and children is almost unbelievable. Profit has never had any regard for human life. That is exemplified in the colonies at the present time. It had no regard for the miners till they were strong enough to defend themselves. In 1824, following the repeal of the Corn Laws, there is the record of the first beginnings of unions among the miners, with an ever-increasing agitation on hours, wages and child labour. By 1840, on a motion by Lord Shaftesbury, a Commission was appointed to enquire into the Employment of Children. I will only give one quotation from the report of one of the Commissioners, R. H. Franks. From a pit in Peebleshire of which the Rev. J. J. Beresford was the leaseholder we get:

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\*A *History of the Scottish Miners from the Earliest Times*, by R. Page Arnot. Illustrations drawn and compiled by Reginald T. F. Turner. (Allen & Unwin. 446 pp. 30s.)

*Margaret Watson, 16 years of age, coal-bearer.*

I was first taken below to carry coals when I was six years old, and have never been away from the work, except a few evenings in the summer months, when some of us go to Carlops, two miles over the moor, to learn the reading: reads a little. . . . We often have had bad air below, had some a short time since, and lost brother by it; he sunk down and I tried to draw him out but the air stopped my breath and I was forced to gang.

Following on the great Chartist campaign a new impetus was given to trade unionism and in 1841, the Miners' Association of Great Britain and Ireland was formed in Wakefield. Its organisers came into Scotland and for a time had a measure of success but by 1847-48 it was a victim of the economic crisis and a blight seemed to fall on the district unions in England and Scotland. But the lessons learned weren't lost:

New men and new ideas, shaped from the lessons of the past, were preparing to take the stage. One such man, who was later to represent a very great advance in the organisation and outlook of the miners, was at that time growing up and coming to manhood. He was a young miner who was destined to become the foremost leader of the British miners and, for a period, of the whole trade union movement. His name was Alexander McDonald. (Page 37.)

From McDonald's great work of agitation there developed the conditions that brought forth Keir Hardie and Smillie and new and potent advances in Scottish miners' organisation. But between the rise of Alexander McDonald and the coming of his successors, there were many fierce and bitter struggles in the mining areas of the country, including the establishment of the 8-hours day by the miners of Fife. This great event was celebrated by an annual Fife Gala, which has now been merged in the All-Scotland Gala.

With Hardie and Smillie and a number of other young miners, all influenced by the new wave of socialist propaganda that was sweeping the country, considerable advances were made in organisation, leading to the Scottish Federation which was affiliated to the Miners' Federation of Great Britain in place of the one or two district unions hitherto affiliated. From then on, while the district unions retained their identity, a Scottish Executive, appointed at an annual conference, represented the Scottish Miners. This continued as the form of organisation till the coming of Abe Moffat, who, with a number of active colleagues, succeeded in amalgamating the six district unions into one Scottish Miners' Union, now the Scottish Area of the National Union of Mineworkers, which came into existence with the amalgamation of the district unions throughout the whole of Britain. But again we must note the titanic struggles that took place in the intervening period. Surely no body

of workers anywhere have been through so much, and suffered so deeply as the miners. I have had much association with the miners of Scotland. From my earliest days as a working-class agitator, I couldn't fail to note the fierce and unquenchable hatred for the coal-owners, wherever I went. And the cause was not far to seek. Their conditions of work, with disaster and death ever at hand. The pit rows which constitute their homes, disgracefully inadequate for health or for rearing their families, with hunger only too often their grisly companion, while the coal-owners and their families lived in idle luxury, regardless of the 'blood on the coal'.

The great Seven Months' Lock-out in 1926, following the betrayal of the General Strike, was but one outstanding example of the many harsh battles the miners have had to fight in their long struggle against the rapacious coal-owners. It can be understood, therefore, how gladly they welcomed the decision taken by the Labour Government to nationalise the mines. This was what they had advocated for long enough. But the nationalisation of the mines has not worked out as they would have expected it. The coal-owners are still the first charge and the old type of official still runs the mines. Big changes are still required before the Miners' Charter gives the miners the life to which they are entitled. The Scottish Miners and their leaders are fully conscious of this and as their Conference and Executive discussions and resolutions show, they are determined to bring these changes about at the earliest opportunity. They have a grand and powerful organisation and a leadership that stands out for its energy and its integrity. In the forefront is Abe Moffat of whom the miners declare 'he's the best we ever had'. He is certainly in the best traditions of earlier leaders, with a Marxist understanding of the class struggle that they lacked. The latter part of this history brings out in clear relief his great qualities as a miners' leader. You must read this book. It is Marxism in life or living Marxism. You must get others to read it. As I said at the outset, it expresses the March of History as it goes on all over the world. The madmen who can only see profit will try by every means 'to turn the clock back'—to stop the March of History. They can never do it. It goes on, more powerful with every day that passes, and the Scottish Miners will not fail their fellows, will not betray their own history. They are of the march and on the march and they will keep marching till the goal—the goal of Socialism and lasting Peace—has been won throughout the world. Here is a book that will live and will give inspiration to all who read it.