
In *North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity: 1945-1996*, Keith Gildart provides a new picture of the Welsh working class. Gildart asserts that the stereotype of militant leftist South Wales coal miners has dominated the public image of Welsh miners. His book seeks to balance this picture by providing an in-depth examination of Welsh mining in the second half of the twentieth century.

After a brief overview in Chapter One, in Chapter Two, Gildart focuses on the period from 1945 to 1963. The author explains how the main miners’ union, the National Union of Miners (NUM), became further enmeshed within the politics of the Labour Party as a result of the nationalization of the mining industry following WWII. He provides a detailed discussion of the relationships between the locals of the North Wales mines and the area-wide union leadership. The miners’ unions had greater difficulty in North Wales because the Labour Party was not as strong in North Wales as it was in South Wales or the North of England.

The next chapter addresses the period from 1964 to 1971 and assesses the impact of the many mine closures on the NUM from the explicit perspective of North Wales. This period of transition in which technological modernization furthed the decline of the coal industry, left the NUM with a more fragile hold in North Wales.

The next period covered in the book, from 1972 to 1982, was a time of greater division between North and South Wales. The South Wales NUM became so concerned about the increasing amount of cheap “coke” coal being imported into the U.K. that they called for a national strike. This call for industrial action was not supported by North Wales labor leaders – the beginning of many political divisions between North and South Wales. In 1981, to protect specific coal mines targeted for closure, the NUM declared a national strike. The striking South Wales miners entered North Wales coalfields to picket. The North Wales union leadership did not advocate crossing the picket lines but also wouldn’t strike without the validation of a national ballot. Such stances, along with the failure of North Wales union leadership to support NUM President Arthur Scargill, deepened the divisions between the North and South in Wales.

Gildart opens Chapter Four with a pithy synopsis of the devastation of the 1983-1988 period: “Miners were to see their union divided, their pits closed and the destruction of the way of life which had shaped their political consciousness and their cultural affiliations.” (p. 154). Thatcherism proved to easily overcome the formerly powerful strategies that the miners had successfully used in the past: the Labour party and union solidarity. Thatcher’s “attack on organized labour went beyond anti-trade union legislation as the government increasingly curtailed the activities of strikers under the criminal law.” p. 111.

Chapter Five summarizes the final decline of the coal industry in North Wales. By December, 1994, British Coal was broken up and privatized. The figures Gildart provides are striking: in 1947, when the nationalization of coal industry began, 958 mines were in operation; when the industry was de-nationalized over 40 years later, only 20 active mines remained.

*North Wales Miners* is a comprehensive, scholarly examination of North Wales coal mining for the specialized reader – especially one who comes to the book with
extensive, detailed foreknowledge of British, and chiefly North Wales, culture and politics. Of particular appeal to the specialized reader is the extreme detail the author takes, such as in recounting the politics of each mine, with discussion of who said what when.

The author brings his narrative to life with direct quotes from individuals he interviewed, from union meeting minutes, or from public speeches. Unfortunately, the speaker’s name is sometimes the extent of her/his identification. Usually, the reader will be able to recognize the speaker when s/he is a well-known, or previously discussed, political figure or union official. However, occasionally, the reader is left to wonder if she missed the earlier identification or if the quote is from a rank-and-file interviewee added in this single instance for “flavor.” For example, Gildart begins a paragraph on page 106 with the sentence: “Brian Woods, who had come from Mosely Common, was happy at Point of Ayr because of the low level of the strikes.” Given the prominence of this quote, I initially thought I should already be familiarized with Brian Woods – either from earlier in the text or from his public distinction. Only after consulting the footnotes did I realize that this was actually a rank-and-file worker, who hadn’t been introduced previously.

Additionally, Gildart makes fleeting references to people and events with which the average North American reader might not be familiar. For example, in his discussion of union leadership in the 1930’s, Gildart mentions that “In the same year, the Gresford disaster sent the union and the coalfield into a state of shock...” (p. 19). Nowhere is the Gresford disaster explained or referenced again. Although such references are made infrequently, they are scattered throughout the book, so those who lack this background, or are not steeped in this literature, might need to first read a more general book on North Wales or on coal mining in the U.K.

Despite these minor shortcomings, North Wales Miners is an important contribution to industrial sociology and labor history. The perspective of the North Wales coalfields challenges previous scholarship, especially Marxist and Revisionist accounts of the rise and decline of the coal industry in Wales and the U.K. In illuminating tensions between the national and local unions, Gildart successfully offers an alternative to the overgeneralized depiction of this important area of research.