Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, *Women and the Miners' Strike, 1984–1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023)

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Review published in *Urban History*:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096392682400049X

One quote that sticks in my mind is from a retired union leader in the mining town of Butte, Montana, the scene of many long and bitter strikes. Asked by historian Janet Finn about how he survived such lengthy disputes, he talks of pickets and marches, but she presses him again: '"how did you survive day by day for nine months without a salary?" After a moment of silence, he said, "Well, I guess you'd have to ask my wife."'[1]

Women and the Miners' Strike starts in a similar way, with quotes from an interview with an ex-miner and his wife discussing how to characterize the work of the women's support movement during the strike. Some 40 years on, this movement has become an integral part of popular memory of the strike.

This is hardly a representative picture of the strike though, as Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson explain in this deeply researched and fascinating book. The main basis for the book is 84 oral histories with coalfield women, women whose fathers and husbands were miners, from across the former coalfields. Collectively, these interviews reveal ambivalence about the strike and even opposition alongside support and shatter the popular assumption that coalfield women were downtrodden housewives transformed by sudden immersion in activism and industrial struggle.

Women's role in the strike has been characterized by what the authors term 'celebratory accounts' (p. 16) written after the end of the strike to salvage something from the defeat. Women's support groups became the representative image of the dispute. In fact, only relatively small numbers were actively involved in these groups, around 5 per cent of miners' wives and partners. Accounts focusing on these groups therefore 'tend to obscure the fact that the vast majority of women in coalfield communities did not join them' (p. 85). Some opposed the strike too and some of the most fascinating material in the book is about this, such as the group of women who organized opposition to flying pickets at their local colliery. The authors make the astute point that they had something in common with women who supported the strike: knowledge of the dispute and willingness to intervene.

What most coalfield women thought about the strike and what they did during it is carefully unpacked over seven broadly chronological chapters following the introduction. Chapter 2 begins with the long background to the strike and changes in mining communities during the post-war period. Chapters 3 to 6 deal with different periods of the strike while the final two chapters deal with the aftermath and how the strike is remembered. Retracing the events of the strike, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson show it rarely resulted in transformational change

[1] Janet Finn, *Tracing the Veins: Of Copper, Culture, and Community from Butte to Chuquicamata* (Berkeley, 1998), 190.

in women's lives. Change in coalfield women's lives was more gradual and longer term, rather than precipitated by strike action, and not much different to broader changes in working-class women's lives in this period. It was broad changes in marriage, education and work that allowed the women's support movement to happen. Yet the authors do not dismiss the idea of transformational change as a myth and argue that reference to this idea allows their interviewees to explain and narrate change in their own lives.

Change had already occurred in Britain's coalfields, as the authors show convincingly in chapter 2. Much of this was about change in the urban environment. The tightly knit mono-economies of pit villages were in decline and the huge programme of pit closures in the 1960s and 1970s meant that many miners were now commuters. Coalfield communities had become less distinctive from other working-class communities. This had implications for the strike. Close-knit communities helped sustain the strike, not only through support networks but also through the fear of social ostracism. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson show that many mining families lived outside such communities by the 1980s.

The work of women sustained the strike through everyday support to male miners, through the rapid emergence of support groups and through women's wages. This is how Britain's coalfield communities survived day to day for so long without the miners' wage. This has also been the case during strikes in many other mining communities around the world. The authors present the book as a British story and there is no engagement with events and experiences outside Britain, aside from a passing reference to a 1951 dockers' dispute in New Zealand. This is a shame. Much of what the authors discuss about the role of women in the dispute – like publicly attacking the masculinity of strike-breakers – are common features in other mining communities and there is a rich literature about this. It is not only a British story.

Women and the Miners' Strike brings important new perspectives and details about the dispute. Yet it does have something in common with existing accounts of the strike: the book and the testimonies from women interviewed are pervaded with a deep sense of loss. The industry is gone and with it much of coalfield life. There is another quote that sticks in my mind, this one from a collection of interviews in the 2000s with women who worked at mines on the Cumberland coalfield. Asked about her life then, one replied promptly: 'Ah'd gaa back tomorra.'[2]

[2] "I would go back tomorrow." Maureen Fisher and Sue Donnelly, *"Ah'd gaa back tomorra!": Memories of West Cumbrian screen lasses* (Whitehaven, 2004)