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Reflections on Labour History in Irish-Scottish Studies

Terry Brotherstone

Each of the essays in this valuable issue of the *Journal* guest-edited by Chloe Alexander speaks eloquently for itself. The reflections that follow concern the broader significance of the symposium where they were first aired, which I regretted being unable to attend. It came, I thought, at a significant moment both for British labour historiography and in Irish-Scottish comparative studies; and the sense of significance has only been increased by political developments since.

We are half a century on from the decade, the 1960s, which saw the emergence in British mainstream scholarship of Marxist-influenced social history and of a new interest in labour history as a distinctive – and for many practitioners a politically engaged – sub-discipline, deploying class and class struggle as central concepts. In the following decade came critical reaction, focusing on the limitations of the foundational works and seeking to develop approaches sensitive to the dangers of reductionism and more flexible in encompassing ideas about gender, race and sexuality. Then, in the 1980s, some saw these developments as supplanting rather than supplementing the earlier achievements.

Many historians in Scotland and Ireland, meanwhile, whether concerned with these theoretical and methodological questions or not, were increasingly provoked by the Anglocentricity of much otherwise innovative scholarship. During the mid-1970s, the first of the series of essay-collections on the comparative socio-economic development of these two 'peripheral' nations, referred to above by Emmet O'Connor, appeared, pointing a way for researchers who rejected a 'British History' that had often in reality been English history writ large.[1] This approach was important to the broader

[1] For an essay suggesting how an Irish-Scottish approach can counteract not only Anglocentricity but also the not-so-long-ago dominant tendency for 'British history' to be written from 'the viewpoint of the ruling primarily Protestant, overwhelmingly male élite', see Terry Brotherstone, Anna Clark and Kevin Whelan, 'Rethinking the Trajectory of Modern British History: an Ireland-Scotland Approach', in Brotherstone, Clark and Whelan (eds), *These Fissured Isles: Ireland, Scotland and British*

exercise of reinterpreting the history of the four nations that, from 1800 to 1921, formed the United Kingdom and were at the centre of its global empire.[2] When the US Secretary of State Dean Acheson famously declared, at West Point on 5 December 1962, that Great Britain had lost an empire and not found a new role, he might have added that it was also in danger of losing a relevant historical narrative, and was much in need of a new, post-imperial, one.

The new labour history came at a time of growing political crisis for the labour movement as the financial viability of the welfare state and the fundamentals of Keynesian-inspired programmes for dealing with the economic crises of the capital system came under question; and the development of Irish-Scottish studies was in part at least a response to the re-emergence in practical mainstream politics – for the first time since twenty-six counties of Ireland became an independent state in 1922 – of internal nationalisms within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Each of the developing sub-disciplines can be seen as contributing, in its own way, to picking up, at least in a partial way, the post-imperial historiographical gauntlet Acheson had omitted to throw down. Then, in the 1980s and early 1990s, came the collapse of the Soviet system, the growing dominance of neoliberalism and later (in the ongoing crisis that erupted in 2007–08) the implosion of its triumphalist phase. These economic and political changes, and their social consequences must surely in their turn prompt the asking of new and urgent questions about historical interpretation. The Research Institute for Irish and Scottish Studies (RIISS) symposium bringing labour-history perspectives to bear within Irish-Scottish studies – and now recorded in this issue of the *Journal* – was timely indeed.

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The evidence of the recent issues of the leading labour history journals is that, internationally, the discipline has regained confidence following a string of jeremiads in the 1990s about its – perhaps terminal – crisis.[3] A few years ago,

history, 1798–1848 (Edinburgh, 2005), 1–42: the quotation is from Whelan's essay on 'Ireland, Scotland and Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century', 48.

[2] Emmet O'Connor, 'Scotland and Ireland: Labour Directions and Radical Connections'.

[3] For the history of the labour history and its societies in England (Britain), Scotland, Wales and Ireland, see the special supplement to *Labour History Review*, 75 (2010). It includes John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, John Halstead and David Martin, 'Fifty Years On', 1–14; McIlroy's 'The Society for the Study of Labour History, 1956–1985: Its

reviewing Paul Mason's *Live Working or Die Fighting: How the Working Class Went Global*, a popular book but, in its own way, also an important one for scholars, I proposed the headline, 'Labour History Resurgent?'[4] The time has perhaps come to remove the question mark and to encourage new thinking about the critical edge, the capacity to critique historiographical orthodoxy, which labour history – by the nature of its focus on the oppressed and the exploited, and on oppositional struggle and ideas about radical social change – brings to comparative Irish and Scottish historical studies.

In the latter 1980s, teaching history at the University of Aberdeen and inspired in part by the volumes of comparative socio-economic historical essays that had appeared since 1977, I introduced an honours course on Scotland and Ireland since the late eighteenth century. I wanted to create a counterbalance to the conservative way in which, it seemed to me, both British and Scottish history were being taught. Reluctant to plunge our students into the obscurer postmodernist depths of 'the cultural turn', which in any case was being covered in an empirically well-founded way in Aberdeen's innovative 'cultural history' programme, I hoped that the comparative approach would offer something challenging and new without departing from the values of traditional historical scholarship.[5] The seminars focused selectively on aspects of the two national experiences that I thought could instructively be juxtaposed. The relative popularity of the course may have been enhanced by the session on comparative whisk(e)y-tasting, which coincided with the

Origins and Heyday', 19–112; Robert Duncan, 'The Scottish Labour History Society: A Retrospect', 117–27; and Emmet O'Connor, 'The Irish Labour History Society: An Outline History', 147–59. See also Joan Allen, Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (Pontypool, 2010). On the crisis, see also the files of Labour History Review during the 1990s; Neville Kirk, 'Challenge, Crisis and Renewal? Themes in the Labour History of Britain, 1960–2010', *Labour History Review,* 75 (2010), 162–80; and, inter alia, Terry Irving, *Challenges to Labour History* (Sydney, 1996).

[4] Paul Mason, *Live Working or Die Fighting: How the Working Class Went Global* (London, first ed., 2007); Terry Brotherstone, 'Labour History Resurgent?', *Variant* (Glasgow), 33 (2009), 6–7, http://www.variant.org.uk/pdfs/issue33/v33_brotherstone.pdf [accessed 5 February 2015].

[5] For cultural history at Aberdeen towards the end of the twentieth century, see William Scott, 'Cultural History at the Crossroads. A Local Experience and a Personal View' in *Tidskrift for Kultur Studier*, 1 (1995), 56–96. There is a general account of the programme's history in its 2007 twenty-first anniversary Aberdeen conference brochure, 'Varieties of Cultural History', see: http://www.culthist.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/final_conference_booklet.pdf [accessed 28 November 2016]. The programme was, regrettably in my view, eventually axed primarily for managerial rather than pedagogical reasons.

completion of student assessment forms. But it had also, amongst its eclectic topics, aspects of comparative radical and labour history: 'whisky and fre edom,' wrote Burns, 'gang thegither'.[6]

Particular themes included (whether as background or for explicit examination) how the political radicalism that seemed, in the 1790s, to offer the possibility of bringing Scottish and Irish oppositionists closer together, diverged into the class politics of Chartism on the one hand, and, on the other, the nationalism of the age of Daniel O'Connell; and how meaningful it was to compare the early twentieth-century story of John Maclean and the shop stewards' and rent strike movements on 'Red Clydeside' with that of James Connolly, the Easter Rising and Ireland's militant independence struggle.[7] Had this issue of the *Journal* existed then, it might have brought greater sophistication to our deliberations, in particular our efforts to resist an over-simplified idea that, while the political trajectory of modern Scotland was, to a significant extent, determined by class and the rise of labour, Ireland can be understood unproblematically as a story of nationalism and the struggle for home rule or independence. A labour-history approach is one way of promoting greater critical attention to the social-class and political-ideological contradictions within both paths of development.[8]

Scotland's Independence Referendum on 18 September 2014, moreover, showed that the need to stress the class dialectic *within* Irish nationalism must now be accompanied, as some historians have for long insisted, by attention to the lingering, if often dormant, national element within class movements in Scotland.[9] 'Red Clydeside', the leading psephologist John Curtice excitedly

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[6] Robert Burns, 'The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer' (1786): available in many selected editions and online.

[7] Connolly's years in Edinburgh, where he was born in 1868 and became a socialist militant in the early 1890s, was the subject of renewed and more focussed interest in preparation for, and during, the centenary of the Easter Rising in 2016. See, inter alia, Chloe Ross Alexander, 'James Connolly: the Emergence of a Socialist, Edinburgh (1868–1896)', Scottish Labour History, 49 (2014), 74–85; and Allan Armstrong, 'Class, Nation and the Politics of James Connolly: A Research Note', *Scottish Labour History*, 50 (2015), 136–40. At Edinburgh International Festival in August 2016, Festival director Fergus Linehan commissioned Ben Harrison, working from a text I prepared, to script and direct 'Before the Hudson and the Liffey: James Connolly's years in Edinburgh and Leith'. Held on Saturday 20 August, 2016, it was a sell-out performance and discussion event at the Festival centre, The Hub.

[8] For an exemplary exercise by labour historians in providing new perspectives on Irish national history, see the special 1916 Easter Rising commemoration issue of *Saothar*, 41, guest-edited by Francis Devine, Sarah Anne Buckley and Brian Hanley.

[9] The late James D. Young for one: see for example his 'Scotland's Lost Past: British

told BBC breakfast television audiences in his 19 September analysis of the previous day's poll, 'has become nationalist Clydeside.'[10] The vote in the Referendum did not mean that nationalist enthusiasm had replaced class concerns. But much of west-central Scotland – which, in 1922, when ten of the area's fifteen seats were won and 'the Clydesiders' set off from Glasgow's St Enoch station with mass choruses of 'Jerusalem', 'The Red Flag' and 'The Internationale' ringing in their ears, as they promised that , having played their part in seeting the Labour Party on its road to Westminster government, they would enact socialism in the United Kindom – had voted for independence. In contrast, more middle-class areas – in recentl years inclined to favour the Scottish National Party (SNP) in Westminster and Holyrood elections – had not.[11] Formerly solid Labour areas, apparently disillusioned about the party's ability, or even desire, to deliver on social democracy, or an end to austerity, had found in the SNP-led call for independence an opportunity to vote for these things by other means.[12]

The trend continued into the 2015 Westminster general election when the SNP won fifty-eight out of sixty-one seats in a landslide, albeit one enabled by an archaic electoral system, and the 2016 Scottish parliament elections, although in these the vagaries of the proportional representation system meant that the party retained its substantial plurality but lost the narrow overall majority it had gained in 2010. That the shift in voting allegiance represented something relatively deep-rooted, even a historically significant shift rather than a short-term, pragmatic phenomenon, was confirmed by the differential result of the 23 June 2016 referendum on UK membership of the European Union. While the overall vote produced a small but significant majority to leave, over sixty per cent of the Scottish electorate was for staying. All this is surely a reason for fresh reflections on our understanding of Scottish labour

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History and the Paradoxes of the Scottish Nation', in Brotherstone, Clark and Whelan, Fissured Isles, 242–59. Idem, *The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class* (London, 1979); and idem, *The Very Bastards of Creation: Scottish International Radicalism* (Glasgow, 1996).

[10] John Curtice, Professor of Politics at Strathclyde University, 'Breakfast', BBC 1, September 19, 2014.

[11] In the present context a thoughtful (and cross-nationally informed) account of the Scottish referendum and its immediate aftermath is by the Irish, Scottish-domiciled journalist, Peter Geoghegan, *The People's Referendum: Why Scotland will Never be the Same Again* (Edinburgh, 2015).

[12] For my comments on this, see Tom Owen and Terry Brotherstone, 'Britain: A State of Disorder and a Disunited Kingdom', in Cliff Slaughter (ed.), *Against Capital: Experiences of Class Struggle and Rethinking Revolutionary Agency* (London, 2016), 63–109, esp. 91ff.

history, including its interactions with, and differences from Ireland, as we attempt better to grasp what political possibilities the future hold. [13]

Some years after the launch of my undergraduate course, the thinking that lay behind it underpinned an international conference in Aberdeen, which led to the collection of essays entitled *These Fissured Isles: Ireland, Scotland and British History, 1798–1848*.[14] The book, one reviewer wrote, attempted to connect Scotland and Ireland to the 'broader historical narratives' of post-colonial studies, and was, for its time, a publication which 'managed to push through the intimate world of Scottish historians to broad, international audiences.'[15] Chloe Alexander's rationale for organising the RIISS symposium and producing this collection of essays, seems to me to echo the motivation behind that earlier conference and book. Just as, in the latter 1990s, I thought that the possible bicentennial opportunities afforded by revisiting the revolutionary 1790s were being more eagerly grasped by historians of Irish radicalism than by their Scottish counterparts, so she contrasts the critical historical enterprise being officially promoted between 2012 to 2022 as Ireland's 'Decade of Centenaries' with the failure of 'Scottish labour history academics … to launch something similar.'[16] The essays she has attracted, moreover, albeit from an interesting variety of more systematically labour-history standpoints,

[13] The outcome of the referendum on British membership of the European Union in June 2016, when a UK majority supported leaving the Union while a substantial majority in Scotland voted to remain – but an element in the Scottish National Party's support supported the 'Brexit' position – reinforced the argument that the Scottish independence movement has outlived its origins in romantic nostalgia and become an arena of struggle over the country's socio-economic future. The SNP (and the cause of immediate independence) suffered a considerable setback in the unexpected general election of June 2017 that took place after this article was complete; but it remained the largest elected party in Scotland. While the point cannotb be pursued here, I do not think my basic argument is affected. [TB September 2017].

[14] A bequest from Dr J. R. M. Mackie of Glenmillan, financed, amongst other things, six conferences, five of which led to publications, organised by members of the University of Aberdeen History Department towards the end of the twentieth century.

[15] Brotherstone, Clark and Whelan, *Fissured Isles*; Andrew Kincaid, 'The Union's Cracks', *Northern Scotland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Studies*, 27 (2007), 216.

[16] Chloe Alexander, 'Introduction'. *An Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta* / Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht website: http://www.decadeofcentenaries.com [accessed 10 February 2015]. In this context, Alexander's own paper on 'Scottish Responses to the 1913 Dublin Lock-out and the 1916 Easter Rising' was a particularly apt contribution to the RIISS conference: it is a pity that it could not appear here because committed elsewhere, but it can surely be read as a fitting addendum: Chloe Alexander, 'Scottish responses to the 1913 Dublin Lock-out and the 1916 Easter Rising', *Saothar*, 41 (2016), 269–77.

take over chronologically from the point, in the 1840s, at which *These Fissured Isles* left off, providing a further contribution to critical reinterpretation of the history of the nations of the United Kingdom before and after 1922 relevant to everyone seeking historical perspectives on the British isles in the post-imperial world of globalised capital.

The Irish government-sponsored 'Decade of Centenaries' encourages not only a public engagement with scholarly approaches to contemporary Irish history but also renewed interrogation of the politics of the subject. I come from the generation of postgraduates which , as the left-wing historian of modern Germany Geoff Eley wrote in his engaging intellectual memoir *A Crooked Line*, came to labour history during the latter 1960s as young people 'living through a time of excitements and upheaval'. We were, Eley commented, 'seeking to change the world' and believed that 'history really *mattered*.'[17] Labour history can trace its own early history as much in the labour movement as in the universities and it attracted many from amongst the new cohort of historical researchers – afforded opportunities for scholarly careers by the expansion of UK higher education in the era of the 1963 Robbins Report – as much, I think, for political as for academic reasons.[18] This was the time of mass protests against the Vietnam War, the victories of anti-imperialist national liberation movements and in the UK, the raising and dashing of hopes in Harold Wilson's technology-based, utopian version of what he called 'British socialism'.[19] Growing trade-union militancy and the student revolts inspired by the May-June events in Paris and the 'Prague Spring' in 1968 seemed to hold out the real prospect of radical social change: perhaps historical work could play a part in developing broadly based socialist consciousness.

There was also a rich seam of inspiring scholarly work being developed, notably John Saville's and Asa Briggs's edited volume of *Essays in Labour History*;

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[17] Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor [MI], 2005), ix.

[18] The 1963 Robbins Report on higher education facilitated and rationalised the already-taken decision to expand higher education, giving intellectual distinction to the policy and coming to symbolise the social and academic principles lying behind the next quarter century of UK higher education, although the period of adequate funding to implement it was short-lived.

[19] See especially Harold Wilson, *The Relevance of British Socialism* (London, 1964), originally an article in *The Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year*; his speeches in *The New Britain: Labour's Plan* (Harmondsworth, 1964), including the famous Scarborough address to the Labour Party conference on 1 October 1963, which was inspirational despite the careful ambiguity of its apparent promise to harness 'the white heat of technology' in the interest of the working class.

Eric J. Hobsbawm's *Labouring Men*; and, above all, Edward P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, all available by 1964; and Thompson's seminal essay 'History from Below' in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1966.[20] But this work in itself was not simply the product of shifting academic fashion: behind it lay the 1956–7 split in the Communist Party following Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech'. This lifted a corner of the veil previously cast over Stalin's crimes, and the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolution. Scholars previously hampered by sectarian party loyalties and the constraints of inner-party discussion had to rethink old certainties and were eager to enter into a broader intellectual discourse.[21]

Many of those who came together to found the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH) in 1960 had been Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) members. However, others such as Asa Briggs, who was a key figure in giving academic respectability to the enterprise, were not.[22] But the work of the SSLH, which sprouted independent offshoots in Scotland and later in Ireland, was strongly influenced from the beginning by the ideas of scholars attempting to liberate the Marxism they had learnt in the CPGB from its associations with Stalinism.[23] Not the least of the virtues of this symposium is that it contains an essay unapologetically advocating the use of a 'Marxist model' for industrial-relations analysis. While one can argue about whether the

[20] Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds) *Essays in Labour History* (London, 1960); Edward P. Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963); Eric Hobsbawm, Labouring Men (London, 1964). Thompson's 'History from Below' appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966.

[21] Terry Brotherstone, 'Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012: Some Questions from a Never-completed Conversation About History', *Critique*, 64 (2013), 269–286, argues that there were important limits to this discourse that should be revisited.

[22] The Scottish Labour History Society was founded in 1966 and the Irish Labour History Society in 1973.

[23] There is now a substantial literature on the influence on historiography of members of what had been the CPGB Historians' Group. For a discussion between two of them that took place in Aberdeen, see Terry Brotherstone, '1956 and the Crisis in the Communist Party of Great Britain: four witnesses', *Critique*, 35 (2007), 189–209, esp. 205–8. Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (Basingstoke, 1995), by a historical sociologist, is just what its subtitle suggests. The most thoughtful recent assessments of two pivotal figures are Theodore Koditschek, 'The Possibilities of Theory: Edward Thompson's Marxist History' in Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor (eds), *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism* (Manchester, 2013); and idem, 'How to Change History: Reflections on Eric Hobsbawm's *How to Change the World*', *History and Theory*, 52 (2013), 433–50. For a critique of Hobsbawm's Marxism, see Terry Brotherstone, 'Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012): Some Questions from a Never-Completed Conversation about History', *Critique*, 41 (2013), 269–86.

language of Marxism and that of sociological 'model-building' sit productively together, it is surely right to return, in the light of the current systemic global crisis, to an interrogation of what role critically developed Marxist ideas can play in a refreshed dialogue about the nature and purposes of labour history.[24]

If there was a note of hesitation in my earlier suggestion that the time may have come to remove the question mark from my 'Labour History Resurgent?' headline, it was because I want to argue that a fully-fledged resurgence needs to involve the recapturing, not just of academic confidence but also of a sense of political commitment. I do not however, mean commitment to some particular doctrine or programme. But labour history is, or can be, at its best when it seeks to combine scholarly integrity with active intellectual engagement with the situation now facing working people (including many who sociologists in the 1960s told us had become an incorporated and politically complaisant middle class); and with critical interrogation of the idea that, acting as a class, they could be the key agent of transition to a more humane social future. In the 1960s, for many on the left, surrounded by a culture increasingly permeated by proletarian narratives and imagery, particularly in cinema and the newly popular medium of television, this seemed pretty much like common sense; but it is an idea that, in today's much changed society, requires

[24] For a contribution to this argument, see Cliff Slaughter, 'The Theoretical Foundations', part V of Slaughter, *Against Capital*. For a more philosophical, but stimulating, approach to Marxism, history and historical consciousness, see István Mészáros, 'The Rise and Fall of Historical Temporality' in Terry Brotherstone and Geoff Pilling (eds), *History, Economic History and the Future of Marxism: Essays in Memory of Tom Kemp* (London, 1996), 251–92; and Mészáros's work as a whole, particularly his recent *The Necessity of Social Control* (New York, 2015), where he writes about leaving Hungary following the Soviet suppression of the 1956 rising and coming to the UK in part because it is 'the home of the Industrial Revolution … [and of] a working class with tremendously deep roots, and that remains [true today] despite everything.' Political and social commitment, he adds, must have theoretical 'points of reference' and 'there cannot be social transformation without an agency and the only agency conceivable … to take us out of this mess is labo[u]r – labo[u]r in the sense Marx was talking about and which we have to rediscover for ourselves under our present conditions', 53–4. Contributing to the development of the necessary theoretical points of reference, would, in my view, be worth consideration as part of what universities these days like to call a 'mission statement' for a *new*, new labour history (see below). Mészáros's central work is *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition* (London, 1995). His most recent publication, 'From Primitive to Substantive Equality – via Slavery', *Monthly Review Press*, vol. 68(4), 2016, accessible at http://monthlyreview.org/2016/09/01/from-primitive-to-substantive-equality-via-slavery/, is a foretaste of a major study of the state, *Beyond Leviathan*, due in separate volumes between 2017 and 2020.

the kind of radical re-examination, to which labour historians are particularly well-equipped to contribute.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the too easy identification of Marxist theory with the collapse of so-called Soviet Communism (which had little or nothing to do with the communism of Marx's and Engels' 1848 *Manifesto*), together with the shock of the catastrophic defeats inflicted on the traditional industrial working class by the extraordinarily rapid and brutal implementation of neoliberal policies, led to a disabling pessimism and scepticism about theoretical approaches that aspired to go beyond ever more sophisticated ways of describing how things used to be by engaging critically with how they must become. But since the crisis imposed on the world by finance capital in 2007–08, general awareness of the need for radical social change has developed in a far more profound and widespread way than was the case in the 1960s. The contradiction is that the sense of powerlessness to bring about a systemic transformation is also much greater. In the years after the SSLH and its independent national offspring came into being, left-wing labour-movement scholars could assume they were playing an important role merely by documenting both the potentialities of, and the contradictions in, working-class history, more or less taking it as read that they were writing about the social force destined to bring about revolutionary change. The challenge today is to develop critical theory in a period when appearances no longer coincide with political aspiration, while continuing to discover new things through original research carried out with scholarly integrity.

While that is a personal view, I think it is increasingly widely echoed. When Geoff Eley, quoted above as witness to the intellectual and political atmosphere of the 1960s, followed his personal memoir with a volume co-produced on the eve of the financial crisis, with the social historian Keith Nield, called *What's Left of the Social? The Future of Class in History*, he exuded an almost desperate pessimism. He worried that, as the real Berlin Wall was being pulled down, an intellectual equivalent had been erected, dividing politically and socially-engaged historians from those who had become immersed in, rather than productively informed by, the 'cultural turn' of the 1980s.[25] Eley called for a recapturing of the spirit of collaborative scholarly discourse he thought had prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s, taking on board the innovations of the best 'postmodern' studies but not rejecting previous achievements *tout court*. Whether that call has yet been well answered, I am not equipped to judge. But,

[25] Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History. What's Left of the Social* (Ann Arbor [MI], 2007).

to give one example, in the autumn of 2014 a conference at the University of Essex for early career historians focussed on the idea that class, 'firmly at the centre of historical debate' in the 1960s but, 'along with class struggle as a driver of social change' fallen until recently 'out of fashion' as 'a key analytical category' was 'making a comeback.'[26] And, despite Eley's pessimism about the negative reception of the ideas Nield and he had been advocating during the period of 'there is no alternative' to Thatcherite (and Blairite) neoliberalism, the years of crisis since 2007 have seen growing appreciation of their argument.[27]

Soon after Eley's and Nield's book, moreover, and on the eve the financial crisis, Mason's *Live Working or Die Fighting* appeared. Disguised as a journalist's bestseller, it contained a brief but effective critique of a generation or more of labour history. Mason's book is an innovative set of studies that finds echoes of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century class struggles in the battles faced by workers his reporting career has brought him into contact with in many parts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first-century world. He contextualises his studies instructively by recounting his own upbringing. Born in 1960 in working-class Lancashire, until he left home he knew no one who, however they voted, was not a trade unionist or in a trade-union family. His father became a first-generation home-owner of a property that still had an outside toilet. Labour won every election in the area. He lived through many industrial

[26] See 'The Resurgence of Class in History' on 12–13 September 2014: http://www.essex.ac.uk/history/documents/conferences/resurgence-of-class-in-history-programme.pdf [accessed 5 February 2015]. Another sign of changing times was a day conference at the University of St Andrews organised by young historians on 'A Radical Inheritance: Commemoration, Memorialisation and Traditions of Protest in the History of Political Radicalism?', 23 November 2013. Jim Phillips, in his conference report in *Scottish Labour History*, 49 (2014), 22–4, thought the most interesting aspects of my paper on revisiting 'Red Clydeside' were my call for 'a new "new labour history"', looking beyond the historically exceptional welfarist period from World War II to the 1970s, 'and repositioning social class as the central factor in our understanding of the past and the present, tempered by greater awareness of gender and racial inequalities;' and my argument that in Scotland 'devolution … and the independence debate … have dampened class aspirations, narrowing in the process the scope of historical inquiry and understanding'; with academic labour historians having difficulty in transcending 'this low level of [political] ambition' in part at least because of a perceived need to put higher education research priorities – themselves 'highly politicised' – that 'broadly speaking negate the urgency of class conflicts and inequalities' ahead of political engagement.

[27] See, for example, Andrew August, *The Urban Working Class in Britain, 1830–1914* (4 Volumes, London, 2013), I, ix–x; and Keith Mann, *Forging Political Identity: Silk and Metal Workers in Lyon, France, 1900–1939* (New York and Oxford, 2010), 6.

actions, including two miners' strikes (in 1972 and 1974), the second of which brought down a Tory government. Yet he never he saw what he thought of as a political demonstration or the waving of a red flag. The demands he was aware of were for decent working conditions, pensions, health-care and sports facilities. Recounted grandparental memories of the Depression of the 1930s told him more about the meaning of history than any textbook or film, and formed the background to the demand articulated in various ways in the community for 'socialism through evolution'.

This family narrative gives a grounding of personality to Mason's argument that the labour movement as it existed from 1945 to 1989 was quite different from the one covered in *Live Working or Die Fighting*, which stretched from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to World War II. After the war, the unions in the West, allied with the employers and the nation states in the fight against fascism. They were rewarded, more or less effectively and in return for abandoning the aspiration to overthrow capitalism through militant class struggle, with welfarism and an implicit social contract in which they played a key role. In Russia, China and Eastern Europe 'a different deal was imposed: in return for subservience and the absence of democratic rights, the worker … was guaranteed a social wage and a job for life and was vaunted in the public ideology of the Stalinist states.' And, thus, 'for the first time' in its history:

> the world's working class was strategically divided; workers in the communist states lived wholly different lives to those in the west … [R]evolution and class struggle became playthings of the forces ranged against each other in the cold war, in eastern Europe and the developing world. For forty years working-class rebels would be either assassinated by the CIA or trained by the CIA, depending on geography…[28]

Then in the Reagan-Thatcher years, when neoliberal doctrines were imported into western democracies from, in the Chilean case particularly, more violent experiments in Latin American dictatorships, 'these post-war compromises fell apart.'[29]

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[28] Mason, *Live Working*, 277.

[29] For a historically controversial but thought-provoking account of this process, see Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London, 2007).

The industrial democracy that had been built as an instrument of class struggle with national variations in the interwar years continued for the most part only as a 'parallel lifestyle, separate from but not opposed to that of the upper classes', and even this eventually withered away, except perhaps in a few areas such as 'the Welsh valleys … the Tuscan hill towns [and] the Buenos Aires docks.'[30] But by the time Mason's father died in 1986, the threat of mass unemployment had returned and governments were responding to shop-floor militancy by abandoning consensus, freeing capital to seek cheap labour transnationally, and metaphorically or, in the case of the air traffic controllers in Reagan's America, in reality chaining trade unionists hand and foot. In Britain the last battle for 'progress and evolution' was fought by the miners and lost in 1984–5. By the 1990s, neoliberal policies were being pursued in the post-Stalinist states and even by governments that continued to call themselves 'Communist' in China and Vietnam.

In his own story Mason (for long BBC2's 'Newsnight' economics editor before moving in 2013 to Channel 4 and then going freelance)[31] found, *in parvo*, an emblematic account of the sea-change in social opportunities and political attitudes that reflect, in an 'advanced' country, the underlying shifts in the tectonic plates of the capital system that have been at work since (say) the early 1970s.[32] However, the aspect of Mason's book most directly relevant for my argument here is that his background reading leads him to comment that 'during the post-war period "official" labour history was devoted to

[30] To which, after his experience of the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum campaign, he might have added parts of the West of Scotland, though, in that case, the class culture had not so much been preserved in once-industrial areas as transposed from them to post-war housing schemes.

[31] Mason, now the best-selling author of, most recently, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London, 2015) and a political adviser to the Labour Party, returned to this theme in an analysis of the 2016 'Brexit' vote to leave the European Union: see 'We Must Be Ready to Cause a Commotion', *New Statesman*, 23–29 September, 2016, 35-37. His recent commentary (he is now a columnist in the liberal London newspaper, *The Guardian*) places considerably less emphasis on class and class struggle than *Live Working or Die Fighting*.

[32] Although Mason's is a written autobiographical account, it is an example of the usefulness of the personal life-story through which oral history, when critically interpreted, can assist labour historians who want to tease out the big themes in the particular stories that can be researched with empirical rigour. This is worth a comment here because of the potentiality for using oral history in Irish-Scottish labour history. This approach is well demonstrated in the essay by Arthur McIvor of the pioneering Scottish Oral History Centre at the University of Strathclyde.

rationalising the deal made in 1945 between employers and workers on both sides of the Iron Curtain.' 'Only at the edges', Mason continued;

> did academics begin chipping away at the monolith. Edward Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* initiated a school of labour history based on the micro story: not the macro narrative. Much of the insight we now have … [on the topics Mason covers] comes from work by scholars following Thomson's approach. But in this 'new' labour history what gets lost is often story and significance. In reaction to the narrative superimposed on facts by Moscow, modern academics tend to avoid 'big truths' within the life stories of those they have rescued from oblivion.[33]

A year after *Live Working* was published, the financial crisis that was to explode in 2008 and which was to be the subject of Mason's next book, began to make itself felt.[34] The crisis and its political aftermath, I would argue, have provided more eloquent endorsement than any theoretical argument of the need for the post-Thompsonian, *new* 'new labour history' Mason was in effect advocating; for a re-examination of the forces that have brought about radical social change in the past, and the renewal of an historically informed discourse about the ongoing reconfiguration of such forces.

In 2011, at an international conference at the University of Lisbon, a new online journal, *Workers of the World: International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts*, was launched.[35] The subtitle is no accident.[36] At the conference

[33] Mason, *Live Working*, 279.

[34] Paul Mason, *Meltdown: The End of the Age of Greed* (London, 2010).

[35] For my conference paper in Lisbon, see Terry Brotherstone, 'Energy Workers against Thatcherite Neoliberalism. Scottish Coal Miners and North Sea Offshore Workers: revisiting the class struggle in the UK in the 1980s', *Workers of the World*, 1 (2013), 135–54; http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=wotw [accessed 5 February 2015].

[36] *Workers of the World* appeared online in 2012, 'to consolidate the [2011 Lisbon conference] initiative … creating an international association of researchers and institutions involved in the study of [labour].' The editors stated that the 'working class repeatedly continues to make its presence known and by doing so refutes the pessimistic predictions about the end of social conflicts that were popular in past decades … Despite numerous attempts to theoretically declare the end of social classes, strikes, and social movements, the inherent social contradictions in society and workers' own actions constitute imposing evidence to the contrary. Industrial conflicts repeatedly have intersected with other social conflicts and ethnic, gender and generational issues', renewing 'interest in collective action [and] bringing in new

session at which it was discussed, two things were striking. First, the level of international participation, notably from Latin America and second, a level of political engagement, informing a commitment to scholarly objectivity rather than being superimposed on to it, that would probably still be unusual in the UK. It is also significant that outside the university, on the streets of the Portuguese capital, a context of relevance to the scholarly discourse taking place in the seminar rooms was provided by mass demonstrations against the European austerity programme. A proposal that the explicit reference to 'strikes and social conflicts' should be dropped in favour of a formulation stressing the study of working-class life more broadly, for being less confrontational and more in line with postmodernist sensitivities, was firmly rejected.

The early issues of the journal contain a wide variety of empirical material and methodological discussion, including for example, contributions to the discourse inspired by Marcel van der Linden's encyclopaedic and stimulatingly controversial work on rethinking the nature of the global working class.[37] But *Workers of the World* refreshingly recognises, not that labour history should limit itself to the study of open class war, but rather that struggle is implicit in the way in which working people in societies under the hegemony of capital have to live. Whether scholarly focus is on personal life, family relations, gender and racial inequalities, leisure or any other aspects highlighted in the work given new impetus by the 'cultural turn' of the 1980s, this is a fundamental truth of working-class existence. *Workers of the World* is one arena in which the discourse I hope this issue of the *Journal* will help to promote, could develop.

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theoretical and analytical challenges to researchers.' The editors committed *Workers of the World* to innovative 'studies on labour and social conflicts in an interdisciplinary, global, long-term historical and non-Eurocentric perspective', moving away 'from traditional forms of methodological nationalism' and publishing 'empirical research and theoretical discussions that address strikes and social conflicts in an innovative and rigorous manner.' *Workers of the World* is an English-language journal with a multilingual editorial board: submitted contributions can be judged in their original language, facilitating applications for translation costs to research funds available in a number of countries only when publication can be guaranteed: see https://workersoftheworldjournal.wordpress.com/about-the-journal/ Ongoing I [accessed 12 February 2017].

[37] The seminal work is Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays in Global History* (Boston, 2008).

In the 1980s, Neville Kirk, in a fiftieth-anniversary overview of labour history since the formation of the Society for the Study of Labour History in 1960, wrote that it was often claimed that 'the pioneering challenge posed by "young" labour history to the intellectual and political *status quo* during the 1960s and 1970s' had turned 'middle-aged'; it was 'flabby and outmoded, academically, publicly, and politically.'[38] In reality, Kirk argued that the discipline had not only achieved much in its 'wide-ranging … empirical' way, but had tempered its 'eclectic pluralism' by display[ing] core concerns and oppositions'. It had 'been characterised at times by important conceptual, methodological, and empirical initiatives' and 'debates … both within its own boundaries and against other sub-disciplines, disciplines and methodologies.'[39] Aspects of study to which key contributions have been made include 'history from below', class, culture, gender, and labour institutions, and a far from purely negative critique of postmodernism, with renewed interest in how personalities, institutions and languages influence political fortunes.

However, Kirk remained nervous about the tendency of UK labour history to 'retreat into conservative insularity and academicism.' He perceived 'an overriding concern with national and sub-national subject matter at the expense of sufficient engagement with the global, transnational and cross-national comparative concerns … [engaging] increasing numbers of labour historians across the world.'[40] These concerns, I would add, were reflected at the 2011 Lisbon conference. Neither, thought Kirk, was the discipline immune from 'excessive concentration in the competitive, status-ridden and introverted world of higher education': a research agenda, that is to say, increasingly being shoehorned into managerially determined, assessment-culture-led institutional priorities. This has meant a loss in the 'cooperative character and … engagement with matters public and political' that, an echo here of Geoff Eley's argument, characterised the discipline in the 1960s and 1970s.

Kirk sought renewed vigour for labour history through 'once again combining what is best in the tough-minded and "committed" British empirical tradition with a more active engagement with these "outside" forces and issues':

> The current and interlinked crises of global capitalism and the environment may well spark renewed interest among labour historians

[38] Kirk, 'Challenge, Crisis and Renewal?', 169 and 175.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.

> in alternative politico-economic strategies. In this event, the questions of 'commitment' and 'objectivity' will once again come to the fore … The harsh realities of the current global crisis of capitalism will also probably force labour historians to re-think the nature of their practice, its subject matter, its message, and its purpose. The latter is all to the good. Only by engaging with this 'outside' world will British labour history successfully renew itself.[41]

Bringing the methods and discursive perspectives of labour history more systematically to Irish-Scottish studies could valuably contribute to this process, to the agenda proposed by *Workers of the World*, and to the *new* 'new labour history' that Mason's *Live Working or Die Fighting* perhaps foreshadowed. This pioneering issue of the *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* should not be the end of the matter.[42]

[41] Ibid., 163.

[42] This article was completed early in 2015; minor revisions were made early in 2017, with proof corrections one minor update in September 2017.