“Scrap-Heap Stories”: Oral Narratives of Labour and Loss in Scottish Mining and Manufacturing

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Introduction

I witnessed in his later life my father’s deterioration from proud industrial worker and stable breadwinner (he was a father to four kids) to redundancy and poorly paid, precarious, degraded work. Arthur McIvor (snr) had held a steady job almost all of his working life (for 32 years) on the assembly line in a car factory until being made redundant at age 54 as the company downsized in 1980. Thereafter his body was drained in work that was beyond his physical capacity (in a small, old-fashioned dirty steel-works). His deeply engrained work ethic, shaped by wartime service in the Royal Navy, would not countenance premature retirement. He ended up diminished and stigmatised (in his eyes at least) as a factory cleaner, sweeping floors. But at least he had a job. He found some consolation in booze; there was rarely a time when the Bell’s whisky bottle was far from his reach near his favourite armchair in these last years of his life. His degeneration was heart-breaking. My Dad died in 1992 and his life is one I’ve been struggling to make sense of ever since. He shared the fate of millions of industrial workers in the UK and elsewhere facing structural economic change as factories, mines, steel mills, ports and shipyards downsized and closed. They were thrown, as often said, on the “scrap heap”. What was the meaning of such industrial work and its subsequent loss to such men as my father? How did they make sense of all this themselves, through relating their own life stories and narrating the lived experience of this profound rupture in their lives?

This article is an attempt to understand this process through listening to the voices of workers like my father and reflecting on their ways of telling, whilst making some observations on how an oral history methodology can add to our understanding. It draws upon a rich bounty of oral history projects and collections undertaken in Scotland over recent decades, including interviews oral historian Ian MacDougall did for the Scottish Working People’s History Trust. At the Scottish Oral History Centre (SOHC) we have also been collecting and archiving oral interviews since 1995 and have a series of collections on working lives and a growing number of projects relating to deindustrialisation, including a number of outstanding student projects (Clark 2013, 2017; Ferns 2019; Stride 2017). Other sets of archived and extant interviews include excellent sources for the county of Ayrshire, including those undertaken on the Johnnie Walker
plant closure in Kilmarnock in 2011 and the University of West Scotland collection on deindustrialisation in Kilmarnock and Cumnock.¹

Scotland’s Deindustrialisation

Deindustrialisation has dominated the cultural landscape of Scotland since the 1970s and has been the focus of considerable academic study. Important work has examined the economics of industrial decline, the impact of deindustrialisation and plant closures on communities and the extraordinary lengths that Scottish workers went to protest against and resist job losses and the attack on their livelihoods (see, for example, Foster/Woolfson 1986; Phillips 2012, 2017; Perchard 2013, 2017; Clark 2013, 2017; McIvor 2017). Much of this work draws upon oral history interview methodologies with those directly affected, some very extensively. Many of us have also been influenced by path-breaking work on the social and cultural impacts of deindustrialisation in North America, including the inspirational work of Steven High and Alessandro Portelli, to whom we owe a great debt (cf. High 2003; Portelli 2011; Linkon/Russo 2003; K’Meyer/Hart 2009; Walley 2013; Strangleman/Rhodes/Linkon 2013).

Scotland was an archetypal “industrial nation” built on coal, textiles, chemicals and the heavy industries of steel, engineering and shipbuilding. At mid-twentieth century the economy was still dominated by industry and such blue-collar jobs were heavily concentrated in west-central Scotland, in the Clydeside industrial conurbation centred around the port city of Glasgow. From the 1950s the country experienced a particularly rapid and steep rate of deindustrialisation, which accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s recession under the neo-liberal onslaught of Thatcherism where so-called “lame duck” industries were left to the savage vagaries of the market. In Glasgow, industrial jobs as a share of total employment fell from 50 percent in 1951 to just 19 percent in 1991 (Phillips 2017: 316 f.). As elsewhere, deindustrialisation was an uneven and complex process – associated with full plant closures and large-scale job losses, but also persistent and progressive downsizing and company restructuring, with the concomitant rising levels of work intensification, job insecurity and worker disempowerment that went along with mass unemployment and under-employment. There was a shifting in response to market pressures towards lower cost, more flexible labour and a concerted managerial offensive – bolstered by the resurgence of neo-liberal ideologies – to increase workloads, attack trade unions and undermine the labour contract. These processes adversely affected Scottish workers’ health and well-being in complex ways, adding another dimension to a pre-existing poor health record linked to high levels of overcrowding, poverty, deprivation and poor standards of occupational health and safety (for more detail see McIvor 2017: 25 ff.; McIvor 2014). As social researchers Mackenzie and colleagues recently remarked: “Scotland […] now has the worst mortality outcomes, and the widest health inequalities, in Western Europe” (Mackenzie et al. 2015: 4; see also Walsh/Taulbut/Hanlon 2009).

¹ I am grateful to all narrators for telling their stories and to interviewers for permission to use this material and for depositing and archiving interviews with the SOHC (see bibliography for full details).