
The Political Context of Joe Corrie's *In Time o' Strife*

By Dr Malcolm Petrie



Miners and bourgeois in one of Corrie's plays, unspecified, undated, NLS, MSS. 26551, reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland.

The political context of Joe Corrie's most famous work, *In Time o' Strife*, is, at one level, clear enough. The events depicted in the play take place as the six-month lockout that had prevailed in the mining industry following the May 1926 general strike came to an end, and the miners, defeated, returned to work. The play was performed initially by the Bowhill players, an amateur theatre group drawn from the mining communities of west Fife, and was staged first in those very communities. In that sense, then, the play was intended – and remains – a tribute to the sacrifice made by the miners and their families during the general strike, and as a record of the hardships

endured as a result of industrial action. Nevertheless, *In Time o' Strife* can also reveal much about inter-war politics in Scotland, and especially the politics of the radical left; equally, by placing the play in its broader political context, we can illuminate some of the political ambiguities that lie at the heart of *In Time o' Strife*. If this play is unquestionably political, its politics are nonetheless complex, and are not easily accommodated within a single political tradition.^[1]

At a national level, the years after the First World War were a period of dramatic political realignment, as the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the main opposition to an increasingly dominant Conservative Party.^[2] The early 1920s were also critical period in the development of left-wing politics. Although the nature of the Labour Party was altered in 1918 with the adoption of a new constitution that permitted individual membership, which transformed the party from a federal alliance of trades unions and socialist societies into a unitary political party, prior to the general strike it remained the case that left-wing politics in Britain were characterised by a degree of cross-party cooperation between members of the Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party, and the newly-formed Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), especially at a local level.^[3] Thus while the attempts of the CPGB to affiliate to the Labour Party were rejected, such decisions were harder to enforce at a provincial level, where Labour politics continued to be conducted largely through trades and labour councils.^[4] Such bodies, which retained responsibility for nominating parliamentary candidates until the 1930s, were composed of delegates elected by affiliated trades union branches; in areas where there was a strong radical left-wing tradition, most notably the mining regions of West Fife, Lanarkshire and South Wales, individual Communists could secure nomination to the local trades council, and thereby participate in Labour politics.^[5] The importance of trades councils reflected the continued role of local loyalties in shaping the politics of class in this period; they were reflective too of the belief, traceable at least to the syndicalism of the early 1900s, that a successful working-class politics required the creation of distinctive working-class institutions.^[6] The trades councils provided the basis for the local 'councils of action' that emerged during the general strike.

In the years preceding the general strike, however, the Labour leadership strove to ensure that the national prohibition on cooperation with the CPGB was enforced at a local level. This objective assumed a greater importance in the wake of the notorious general election of 1924, which had been dominated by allegations that Labour was allied with Bolshevism.^[7] By the mid-1920s, the principal concern of the Labour leadership was to ensure that its commitment to achieving power via constitutional, democratic methods was beyond question.^[8] The general strike, with its emphasis on local, cross-party organisation and extra-parliamentary methods, was, then, the final flourish of an important strand of left-wing political thought in the early twentieth century, one that was supplanted by an emphasis on securing national electoral success.

This context is crucial when approaching *In Time o' Strife*. Although born in Slamannan, near Falkirk, in 1894, Corrie was raised in Cardenden, West Fife, and entered the mines at the age of 14. In this period, relations on the political left in Fife were defined by the tensions that had arisen between the local trade union establishment and a younger, more radical generation who, by the early 1920s, had been politicised by the First World War and were often Communist in their political sympathies. At this stage, Scottish miners were still organised in county unions, with the Fife miners represented by the Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan Miners' Association; the county unions in turn elected delegates to the National Union of Scottish Mineworkers.^[9] During the 1920s, this structure was undermined by a series of disputes within the Fife union relating to branch voting rights, with the reformers wanting the traditional system of equal voting replaced by a weighted system, giving more say to the larger branches that were often home to the younger, more militant members. The refusal of the union leadership to accede to these demands led to the formation of a so-called 'reform union' in 1923, effectively a pressure group that called for greater internal union democracy.^[10] It was for the paper of the reform union, *The Miner*, that Joe Corrie was employed in the early 1920s. Although John McArthur, a leading figure in the reform union and Communist Party member, was critical of Corrie's failure to subsequently acknowledge the financial support he received at this time, it is nonetheless suggestive of Corrie's political sympathies that he was involved in such circles.^[11] These

disputes within the local labour movement resulted eventually in the establishment of rival miners' unions within Fife in the late 1920s, a development that helped to ensure that West Fife would return a Communist MP, William Gallacher, between 1935 and 1950.^[12]

These tensions between the trade union leadership and their members are present within *In Time o' Strife*. While Corrie's treatment of the striking miners is sympathetic, the union leaders are granted little respect: in the words of Jock Smith, 'the men' of the union were 'richt enough', but 'the leaders' had let them down. There are echoes here of the left-wing warning, used by the Communists but inherited from their syndicalist predecessors, to 'watch your trade union leaders'. We should note, though, that Jock is chided by his wife Jean, who reminds him that he, like many other miners, took little interest in union matters 'till there's a strike, then you find oot that you want new leaders'. This failure to participate actively in union affairs ensured that the men 'just get the leaders you deserve'. Such moments have encouraged commentators to place Corrie within a tradition of working-class political drama. In his influential *Theatres of the Left*, Raphael Samuel situated *In Time o' Strife* within what he viewed as a British version of *proletkult*, a self-consciously proletarian artistic tradition that sought to faithfully depict working-class lives. For Samuel, this combative cultural approach was embraced by the British left in the early 1920s.^[13] A similar commitment to the protection and promotion of working-class culture and identity can be observed in the various regional labour colleges established in the years after 1918, and which were intended to offer an explicitly socialist treatment of economics and history.^[14] Nevertheless, by the close of the decade, these confrontational expressions of working-class identity were becoming increasingly identified with the Communist Party. This was certainly true of the years between 1928 and 1935, when the CPGB, partly due to the influence exerted by the Communist International in Moscow but also in response to the perceived reformism of the Labour leadership, moved sharply to the left. The result was the adoption of the so-called 'class against class' policy: this involved the abandonment of attempts to ally with the Labour Party in favour of condemning Labour politicians as 'social fascists'.^[15] At a cultural level, these were the years of the Workers' Theatre Movement, which, drawing inspiration from

developments in Germany, spurned traditional venues, props and costumes in favour of short sketches and performances – often performed outdoors in working-class neighbourhoods – that were intended to function as propaganda rather than just entertainment.^[16] Corrie's Bowhill Players were, in part at least, inspired by this desire to create, in the words of the Movement, a 'propertyless theatre for the propertyless class'.^[17]

In Time o' Strife is certainly written from the perspective of the left. The miners' cause is treated sympathetically, and Corrie is deeply critical of the timidity and self-interest of the union leaders; influential here would have been the figure of William Adamson, Secretary of the Fife miners' union and the MP for West Fife between 1910 and 1931. Adamson was also a former leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party and had been Secretary of State for Scotland in the first Labour government. Firmly on the right of the Labour party, he was a key opponent of the reform union.^[18] But there is, nonetheless, a certain disquiet in Corrie's depiction of the strike and its consequences. Although the play ends on an uplifting note, with Jean Smith stating that 'there's nae power on earth' that could 'crush the men who can sing on a day like this', there remains a sense that Corrie is troubled by certain aspects of the strike, and especially its impact on individuals.

To take first the question of political tactics. Left-wing politics in the early decades of the twentieth century was rooted in a very public understanding of political participation: central to the radical tradition was the use of demonstrations, rallies and processions. These tactics were perhaps most evident on occasions such as May Day, which in early 1920s Scotland were notable for the broad left basis on which they were conducted: here the purpose was to display the solidarity and dignity of labour, and the conviction that the working class were the coming force in society.^[19] Yet demonstrations could also serve more immediate purposes: in an era when welfare remained the responsibility of local parish councils, targeted protests could act as a useful means of exerting pressure during periods of economic depression. In the autumn of 1921, for example, there were protests across Scotland that forced parish councils to abandon the traditional prohibition on awarding what was termed 'outdoor relief' to the able-bodied unemployed: we can see echoes of these protests in the reaction that follows the news of the Carhill parish council's decision to end

payments to the striking miners and their families.^[20] In the words of Kate Pettigrew, 'if you march a thousand strong to the Parish offices they'll pay out the money'; similarly, Tam Anderson asserts that if the Parish officials refuse to pay, 'we'll tear doon the buildin'.

Had he wished his play to serve as propaganda, Corrie could have portrayed such protests as welcome evidence of the potential of working-class militancy; instead, he presents us with a more sobering vision. The protests to the parish council fail after the demonstrators are asked to send a deputation to the Board of Health in Edinburgh: in Jean's words, this is all part of 'the game, to get you awa' hame again. They ken fine that if they diddle you the first time you'll no' get the same crowd to maich a second time'. Similar misgivings can be detected in Corrie's depiction of Tam Anderson, the young miner who receives a prison sentence after participating in a demonstration intended to shame the miners who have returned to work, especially Wull Baxter. Tam is not naïve: he understands the risks he faces but maintains that 'there's nae escape ... and it'll be worth the sufferin' to come back again and ken that I did my bit'. That said, he expects a sentence of three months rather than the three years he receives. Again, a more straightforwardly left-wing narrative than Corrie's could have used Tam's case to celebrate the heroism of individual activists, drawing on the established narrative of the 'radical ordeal', and its ritual of sacrifice, imprisonment and release.^[21] And we should note that 1,000 Communists were imprisoned in 1926, at a time when party membership was below 12,000.^[22]

Corrie appears more concerned with the impact of the strike on individuals and the community: one of the central themes of the play is that, while the strike may be necessary and just, the price exacted is painfully high. Characters repeatedly express sentiments that blur the boundary between stoicism and resignation: when speaking to his daughter Jenny, Jock echoes Tam Anderson's words, stating that 'there's naebody escapin' the strike ... we're a' getting' a blow o' some kind'. Or, as Jean Smith wonders when discussing the threat of prison with Tam, 'Is it worth it?': the strike, Jean suggests, will collapse at 'some time or ither', and neither Tam 'nor onybody else can stem it, and you ken that'. Even the character of the blackleg Wull Baxter is allowed to elicit some sympathy: making one last attempt to

convince Jenny to emigrate to Canada with him, he accepts his decision to return to work was wrong but says 'It was the strike to blame'. Jenny replies in ambiguous terms: 'Ay, the strike [had] shattered hopes and broken he'rts'.

For Corrie industrial action appears less as something to be celebrated than as a burden to be borne; confronting the coal owners was essential, but the action is doomed to fail in the face of the hostility of the employers and the state, the incompetence – or worse – of the union leadership, and the apathy of many of the miners themselves. To cite once more Jean's efforts to caution Tam Anderson against taking too many risks, 'The miners are a queer crowd, they forget about the fight when they get their first week's pay in their hand'. Equally, when speaking to Jock, Jean complains that

You men dinna ken hoo to strike onywey; you throw doon your tools, come oot the pit, and stand at the street corner till you starve yoursel's back to the pit again.
And when you *dae* go back, instead o' strikin' oot for mair on your rate, you fill mair hutches, and would cut each ither's throat to get them.

Jean's criticisms here are similar to those voiced periodically on the political left to the effect that the workers were their own worst enemies: deferential, anti-intellectual, and apathetic, they were, if anything, complicit in their own exploitation. Key here is the figure of Henry Dubb, a character in a cartoon strip that appeared first in the New York socialist newspaper the *Call*, but which was reprinted in both the Glasgow *Forward* as well as the Labour *Daily Herald*. To borrow Stuart Macintyre's description, Henry Dubb was 'an incorrigible fool who would never stand up to the boss – he swallowed the red herrings of the capitalist press and was prey to every distracting vice, alcohol and sport in particular'.^[23] We may think too of the bleakness of the worldview that underpinned Robert Tressell's *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* a decade earlier.

Corrie was, then, alive to the structural, cultural and intellectual limitations that operated upon working-class radicalism and political engagement in a way that elevates *In Time o' Strife* above the level of *agitprop*: the play is never simply didactic. Jock Smith is both weak and resolute: when we meet

him first he is far from the idealised portrait of the striking miner found in Communist accounts: rather, he is hungover and ready to return to work, having wasted his gambling winnings in the pub; it is only in response to Wull's insulting invitation to blackleg that he recovers his resolve, which is subsequently buttressed by Jean's refusal to allow him to even consider breaking the strike. Even Bob, Jock and Jean's teenage son, who, with his repeated declarations that he 'knows what's needed, a workers' revolution, that's what's needed', is perhaps the most overtly political character in the play, appears more as comic relief than as a serious activist. Certainly, we are never given reason to believe that his grasp of Communist theory extends beyond his rather limited range of slogans.

Where, then, should we place Joe Corrie and the vision of politics that he offers in *In Time o' Strife*? The phenomenon of the regional labour colleges was mentioned above. These institutions had emerged in the early years of the twentieth century, initially on an informal basis, with the aim of meeting the demand for classes in history and economics amongst those unconvinced by existing educational provision. By 1916, a Scottish Labour College was in existence in Glasgow; by 1925 there were 14 district colleges across Scotland educating almost 6,000 students.^[24] Yet the labour colleges were in many regards the last example of a specific form of early twentieth-century working-class identity: independent, assertive, and expressed through distinctive local institutions, it found its most profound manifestation in the figure of the working-class autodidact. Corrie was such a figure: but the general strike signalled, all the same, the limits of this outlook. The failure of the strike discredited local advocates of extra-parliamentary methods, encouraging participation in existing national institutions and strengthening the position of the national Labour leadership. Certainly, by the 1930s, the labour colleges offered little more than training in the practicalities of electoral politics; in the 1960s, they were finally absorbed into the educational department of the Trades Union Congress. The only alternative on the political left was a Communist Party that was, by the middle of the twentieth century, intellectually dependent upon either Moscow or middle-class, university-educated Marxists.^[25] Some among Corrie's generation were willing to accept the intellectual constraints that accompanied Communist Party membership; others

reconciled themselves to the incrementalism and social conservatism of the Labour Party. Corrie, for his part, cleaved to his individualism. But that carried its own price.

[1] All quotations from and references to *In Time o' Strife* refer to the 2013 edition published by Bloomsbury.

[2] Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People: England, 1914-1951* (Oxford, 2010), chapter 2.

[3] Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924* (Oxford, 1974), chapter 5.

[4] David Howell, *MacDonald's Party: Labour Identities and Crisis, 1922-1931* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 380-403.

[5] William Kenefick, *Red Scotland! The Rise and Fall of the Radical Left c.1872 to 1932* (Edinburgh, 2007), pp. 9-13;

Malcolm Petrie, *Popular Politics and Political Culture: Urban Scotland, 1918-1939* (Edinburgh, 2018), pp. 20-7; Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscows: Communism and Working-Class Militancy in Inter-war Britain* (London, 1980).

[6] Richard Price, 'Contextualising British Syndicalism, c.1907-c.1920', *Labour History Review* 63(3) (1998), pp. 261-76.

[7] Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain, 1900-2000* 2nd ed. (London, 2004), pp. 126-7.

[8] Malcolm Petrie, "'Contests of Vital Importance": By-elections, the Labour Party, and the Reshaping of British Radicalism', *Historical Journal* 60(1) (2017), pp. 121-48.

[9] Alan Campbell, *The Scottish Miners, 1874-1939: Volume 2 Trade Unions and Politics* (Aldershot, 2000).

[10] A first-hand account of the dispute can be found in: Ian MacDougall (ed.), *Militant Miners: The Recollections of John McArthur, Buckhaven* (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 60-3.

- [11] MacDougall, *Militant Miners*, pp. 65-6.
- [12] Campbell, *Scottish Miners*; Robin Page Arnot, *A History of the Scottish Miners from the Earliest Times* (London, 1955); Abe Moffat, *My Life with the Miners* (London, 1965).
- [13] Raphael Samuel, 'Theatre and Socialism in Britain (1880-1935)', in Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl and Stuart Cosgrove (eds), *Theatres of the Left, 1880-1935* (London, 1985), pp. 36-41.
- [14] Petrie, *Popular Politics and Popular Culture*, pp. 68-77.
- [15] Matthew Worley, 'Left Turn: A Reassessment of the Communist Party of Great Britain in the Third Period, 1928-1933', *Twentieth Century British History* 11(4) (2000), pp. 353-78.
- [16] Samuel, 'Theatre and Socialism in Britain', pp. 42-8; Matthew Worley, *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain between the Wars* (London, 2002), pp. 204-8.
- [17] Tom Thomas, 'A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class', in Samuel, MacColl and Cosgrove (eds), *Theatres of the Left*, pp. 76-98.
- [18] On Adamson, see the entry in: William W. Knox (ed.), *Scottish Labour Leaders: A Biographical Dictionary, 1918-1939* (Edinburgh, 1984), pp. 58-61.
- [19] Petrie, *Popular Politics and Political Culture*, especially chapter 4.
- [20] Malcolm Petrie, 'Public Politics and Traditions of Popular Protest: Demonstrations of the Unemployed in Dundee and Edinburgh, c.1921-1939', *Contemporary British History* 27(4) (2013), pp. 490-513.
- [21] On the 'radical ordeal', see: Matthew Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England, 1832-1914* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 54-8
- [22] K. D. Ewing and C. A. Gearty, *The Struggle for Civil Liberties: Political Freedom and the Rule of Law in Britain, 1914-1945* (Oxford, 2000) pp. 155-213.

[23] Stuart Macintyre, 'British Labour, Marxism and Working-Class Apathy in the Nineteen Twenties', *Historical Journal* 20(2) (1977), pp. 479-96, at 487.

[24] Petrie, *Popular Politics and Political Culture*, pp. 68-70.

[25] Stuart Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-1933* (London, 1986), pp. 238-9.