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Transgressing the Moral Economy: Wheelerism and Management of the Nationalised Coal Industry in Scotland

Andrew Perchard and Jim Phillips

This article illuminates the links between managerial style and political economy in post-1945 Britain, and explores the origins of the 1984–1985 miners' strike, by examining in longer historical context the abrasive attitudes and policies of Albert Wheeler, Scottish Area Director of the National Coal Board (NCB). Wheeler built on an earlier emphasis on production and economic criteria, and his micro-management reflected pre-existing centralising tendencies in the industries. But he was innovative in one crucial aspect, transgressing the moral economy of the Scottish coalfield, which emphasised the value of economic security and changes by joint industrial agreement.

Keywords: Coal; Management Style; Industrial Relations; Miners' Strike; Moral Economy

Albert Wheeler became Director of the Scottish Area of the National Coal Board (NCB) in 1980. His highly abrasive management style, closing pits and attacking trade union rights, provoked a series of pit-level disputes in Scotland. These contributed to the outbreak of the year-long strike against colliery closures and job losses across the UK coalfields from March 1984. Wheeler disrupted extant worker–management relations in the industry, moving managers around pits, pursuing the radical reduction—through closures and diminished joint industrial regulation—of production costs. Cost pressures were undeniably stronger in the industry in Scotland

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than in other areas of the UK, and Wheeler's methods were adopted elsewhere in the NCB only after the strike had been lost by the trade unions in 1985.¹ But there are dangers in exaggerating the novelty of his role. Examination of the longer history of the nationalised coal industry reveals a recurrent emphasis by Scottish Area management on production and costs, and a related willingness to override colliery managers and localised interests. This was particularly evident from the late 1950s, when the NCB responded to competition in energy provision—chiefly from oil, gas and nuclear power—with a major programme of closures. This was accompanied by productivity drives, imposed upon colliery-level management and miners by National and Area officers, exerting considerable strain on managers as well as workers.²

In contextualising and analysing Wheelerism, this article contributes to understanding in two areas. First, by exploring trends in management–worker relations, it illuminates the origins and character of the 1984–1985 strike. The literature on this tends to focus on peak level relations between the Conservative government, the NCB and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), changes in the energy 'mix'—more gas, oil and nuclear provision—that weakened the miners politically, and whether coal was economically 'viable' by the 1980s. The literature also privileges leadership personalities, notably the Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, the NCB Chairman, Ian MacGregor, and the NUM President, Arthur Scargill.³ There is a small literature on workplace politics and managerial–union relations, including several important area-level studies. Some, like this article, have been written recently with the benefit of historical distance, newly available archive perspective, and considered participant reflection.⁴ Others, while well informed, were written 20 years or so ago, without the benefit of historical perspective,⁵ and tend to focus on the strike itself, and the particular fissures between Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire.⁶ This Scottish study may not be—and perhaps cannot be—typical of developments elsewhere, but in its relative peculiarity is fundamental to understanding of the strike. There were NCB officials who moved against unions in England, notably Ken Moses and John Northard, respectively, the North Derbyshire and Western Area Directors, but really only once the strike was underway in 1984, organising the 'back to work' movement,⁷ and encouraged by MacGregor, who became NCB Chairman in the summer of 1983. Wheeler, by contrast, began attacking joint regulation in 1982, well before McGregor's arrival and the strike, and in the coalfield area with the most pronounced market and financial problems. On 6 March 1984, the NCB presented unions with projected data for the forthcoming financial year. These showed a loss exceeding £100 million on total production of marginally less than 100 million tonnes. More than 50 per cent of this deficit would arise from extracting just over 5 million tonnes in Scotland.⁸ So Scottish pits were particularly vulnerable to closure on economic grounds, and, because of this, 50 per cent of miners in Scotland were already in pit-level dispute with management *before* the 'national' strike rolled out across the British coalfields from 12 March 1984.⁹ The Scottish workplace origins of the strike are the subject of a recent analysis,¹⁰ which this study recasts and builds on by relating Wheelerism to longer running developments,

including the ‘moral economy’ of the Scottish coalfields. This was, like the Thompsonian concept, a question of customs and expectations,¹¹ with two key factors: joint regulation, through agreement between managers and union representatives, of workplace affairs, including pit closures, job transfers and substantial alterations to production and the labour process; and guaranteed economic security, so that miners displaced by colliery closures could find equally well-remunerated alternative employment, at other pits or elsewhere in industry. Wheelerism—with decisions by unilateral managerial fiat, and in the context of a radical decline in manual employment opportunities in Scotland—transgressed the moral economy on each of these counts.

Second, the analysis of workplace and managerial factors in shaping the strike, in a relatively longer historical perspective, points to the importance of the interaction between the political, economic and business environment, on the one hand, and managerial style, on the other hand. Wheeler’s approach, especially closing pits against workforce opposition, and characterising these pits as basic economic units rather than social and community resources, further infringed upon the coalfield moral economy. It was consistent, however, with the ascendant ideological conception of political economy in the 1980s, emphasising market competition, reduced public enterprise and trade union ‘reforms’ to strengthen managerial agency.¹² In management style terms, this encouraged the adoption of what Alan Fox called unitary practices as well as attitudes,¹³ with the downgrading of labour’s consultative role and collective bargaining mechanisms, especially at industry and company level, highly notable features of the post-1979 economic environment. This process is usually understood in terms of private sector developments, particularly in manufacturing,¹⁴ but the analysis here indicates its presence in the nationalised coal sector in Scotland under Wheeler. This is an important connection to establish. Managerial style literature relates the various modes adopted—including, *inter alia*, paternalist, pluralist and authoritarian—to company ownership and scale, economic sector and the extent of market competition.¹⁵ The analysis here reinforces the importance of the final of these factors, market competition, with coal’s increasingly precarious position in energy supply guiding Wheeler’s approach, but the broader and highly ideological—hegemonic, even—economic discourse of the early 1980s carried greater salience. Wheeler’s approach diverged from pre-1979 Scottish coal industry management, where unitary attitudes were evident but accompanied by pluralist practices that were roughly consistent with the coalfield moral economy. Wheeler reinforced the broad trend in nationalised coal management to greater centralisation and the erosion of local autonomy, but broke widely held coalfield assumptions about the industry’s social elements and obligations by pursuing his cost-reduction agenda through unilateral managerial fiat.

The analysis proceeds in three parts. First, the main elements of Wheelerism are defined, exploring the pre-strike escalation of industrial tension in the Scottish coalfields. Second, the longer pre-Wheeler history is examined, establishing the centralising and productionist tendencies that Wheeler’s management developed.

Third, the impact of Wheelerism, the character and extent of changes wrought after 1980, is then weighed, emphasising in particular the ‘fit’ between Wheeler’s management style and the broader political and economic environment, and the manner in which his approach transgressed the coalfield moral economy. The analysis is based on published and archive materials from NCB pit level and other records in the National Archives of Scotland (NAS), NCB materials in The National Archives (TNA), Kew, union records in the Scottish Mining Museum (SMM), Newtongrange, transactions of managerial professional associations, and interviews with former managers, union officials and miners conducted by the authors.

Wheelerism

Albert Wheeler was personable, affable even, and ‘a handshaker’, in the words of David Hamilton, NUM delegate at Monktonhall in Midlothian until 1985. On entering a room, Wheeler would approach all those present, and proffer a firm and sometimes prolonged handshake, accompanied by steady eye contact, even in encounters where disagreement or even confrontation was likely. The combination of courtesy and directness left a lasting impression on Hamilton, who became a Labour MP in 2001, opposed British participation in the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003,¹⁶ and says that Wheeler was ‘like George Bush’, another ‘handshaker’. He remembers especially an encounter where Wheeler gripped his hand while stating—with a smile on his face—that he wanted to ‘break’ the union to drive down production costs in Scotland.¹⁷

Similar anti-Wheeler narratives emerge from other trade unionist memories. These suggest what oral historians term ‘composure’, where historical witnesses construct internally consistent personal and political narratives about the past,¹⁸ in this case rationalising the decline of coal mining in Scotland, and also recall Alistair Thomson’s ‘cultural circuit’, where a collective narrative shapes personal testimony which, in turn, reinforces the collective narrative.¹⁹ Eric Clarke, NUM Scottish Area (NUMSA) secretary in the 1970s and 1980s, first met Wheeler, ‘a wee insignificant fella fae Leith’, at training college in Midlothian. Wheeler acquired a minor disability, a ‘gammy hand’, after an accident underground at Lady Victoria Colliery in Midlothian, before working for the NCB elsewhere, notably as the Deputy Director (Mining) for North Derbyshire.²⁰ When Wheeler returned to Scotland in 1980, as NCB Scottish Area Director, he was tougher-edged, Clarke recalls, and unfavourably different from ‘old style’ senior managers, notably Jimmy Cowan, a previous Scottish Director who by 1983 was a senior figure at NCB headquarters in London.²¹ Michael McGahey, NUMSA President and national Vice-President during the strike, was implicitly criticising Wheeler when speaking to a coal mining heritage magazine in 1987 about his relations with George McAlpine, Wheeler’s successor: ‘I’ve known him since he was quite young. I negotiated with his father in the early days before nationalisation. He’s part of the industry. He knows mining communities—he was a miner—and he’s got the feel.’²² Nicky Wilson, a union official at Cardowan in Lanarkshire at the time of its 1983 closure, discusses in the same discursive manner the treatment of his colliery’s

manager, John Fram, who refused Wheeler's initial instruction to shut the pit. As a result, Fram, 'a steeped in the wool manager ... a real Coal Board man', was removed from his post and 'stuck in a Doocot at Green Park', the NCB's Scottish headquarters, until his retirement. Other 'old managers' like Fram, 'good mining engineers', were similarly squeezed out, and introduced in their place by Wheeler were the 'ruthless bastards' to execute his cost-controlling strategy.²³

The 'outsider' anti-Wheelerism union narrative is highly striking, for Wheeler himself was not an outsider, but a product of the NCB's professional and career development. Like other coal managers he had coalface experience, before progressing from 1956 or so up the managerial ranks in Midlothian, via management training and Heriot-Watt University before obtaining higher positions still in Derbyshire.²⁴ The anti-Wheeler 'outsider' narrative is derived, then, not from his personal background, but his manner and policy as Area Director. He was belligerent not only with union officials, berating the management side too at a Mining Institute of Scotland meeting at Heriot-Watt in 1982 for 'our ever-growing ability to explain away our shortcomings which has contributed to the decline of Scottish Industry, including Coal Mining'. Addressing complaints that centrally devised NCB production policy ignored the Scottish coalfields' major geological problems, he observed that, 'it is not faulting itself that causes losses of output but rather our inability to deal with it or prepare alternative courses of action'. Like Margaret Thatcher's recurrent but futile attempts to restore public support in Scotland for her unpopular governments by evoking their philosophical propinquity to the Scottish Enlightenment,²⁵ Wheeler too deployed the spirit of the country that 'produced Watt, Napier, Bell, Carnegie and Fleming' to counteract what he saw as the tendency to apologise 'for our inability to overcome today's problems'.²⁶

Wheeler's strategy—closing pits deemed 'unprofitable' or 'non-viable', and challenging the established responsibilities and privileges of worker representatives—developed within larger debates about the economics of coal production. Coal's competitive market position had sunk in the 1950s and 1960s, but stabilised with the fourfold increase in the oil price in the winter of 1973–1974.²⁷ This was a temporary reprieve, however. An increasingly pejorative narrative predominated after 1979, that coal was a high-cost monopoly, draining public expenditure, and its management imprisoned by trade union power. This was articulated by the Institute for Economic Affairs,²⁸ and the Conservative government's Coal Industry Act of 1980, which sought an entirely self-financing industry by 1984.²⁹ The high-cost/trade union prisoner narrative was further consolidated by the Monopoly and Mergers Commission's (MMC) 1983 report on the industry, which recommended a 10 per cent cut in capacity through closing the least economic pits, to achieve annual savings of £300 million.³⁰ There were alternative economic arguments. The authors of 'The Aberystwyth Report on Coal', published by the University College of Wales's Economic History Department, analysed variable pit-level productivity in terms of differential investment rates and the relative difficulty of geological conditions;³¹ and Andrew Glyn of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, argued that NCB data on which the MMC

calculated production costs was fundamentally misleading: it included high-interest payments to the government on capital loans, 'transfer payments' arising from past activities—compensation for subsidence and pensions to retired employees—and 'social costs', mainly redundancy payments. Hence the government's £1.3 billion subsidy to cover NCB 'losses' in 1983–1984 was entirely swallowed by charges that 'manifestly' were 'not costs of production'.³²

Wheeler had no doubts, however, about his cost-reducing obligations as Scottish Area Director, and by 1983 had already closed what he called his worst 'losers': Lady Victoria and Bedlay in Lanarkshire in 1981, and Kinneil in West Lothian at the end of 1982, in the latter case defeating official union and concerted pit-level opposition.³³ There was a further thread connecting Wheelerism and the MMC report, which argued that there were too many 'home-grown mining engineers' in coal industry management, who were too close to union officials in their sympathies.³⁴ Wheeler's key initiative on this issue, developed from the spring of 1983, was disrupting extant pit-level relations by rotating managers around the coalfield: 'moving his chessmen', in the words of Iain Chalmers, a union activist at Seafield in East Fife.³⁵

These managers explicitly jettisoned existing joint industrial arrangements. Willie Clarke recalls the change in managerial style at Seafield, where he was a union official, which followed the arrival in 1983 of a new pit boss, George Caldow, arising from Wheeler's ambition to destabilise workplace trade unionism and reduce labour costs. Hence Caldow abandoned a provision where miners engaged in development work, and unable to access production bonuses, were paid additional compensation. Workers who lost money were angered,³⁶ and further antagonised by Caldow's frequent allegations of reduced employee effort. There was, it would seem, a managerial 'strategy of tension' at Seafield, directed or at least inspired by Wheeler. This involved suspending the colliery's joint industrial consultation and conciliation mechanisms in January 1984, precipitating the stoppage of work that began in February 1984 and continued until the end of the national strike in March 1985.³⁷

Similar pit-level disputes materialised elsewhere. At Monktonhall a new manager also arrived in 1983, William Kennedy, who, in a meeting with union officials, literally tore up the document outlining various local joint industrial agreements.³⁸ Kennedy provoked his employees by suspending development work, and ignoring the abandoned joint industrial procedures on two key questions: the targeting of men who he alleged were engaged in a 'go slow', with letters threatening dismissal; and direct offers of redundancy to men aged 50 and over. There followed from September to November a seven-week, pit-level strike, which started as a lock-out when men arriving a few minutes late for shift after a union meeting to discuss the growing crisis were sent home.³⁹ Tensions were evident at other pits, including Bilston Glen, also in Midlothian, and the Ayrshire pair of Barony and Killoch, where management reproduced identical allegations of low worker effort, poor production records and threatened job losses and closures.⁴⁰

These pit-level tensions and disputes, gathering in intensity in 1983–1984, point to a substantial and generalised diminution of trust between workers and managers in the

Scottish coalfield. The NUM leadership in Scotland responded by constructing support carefully for strike action in opposition to further closures and job losses.⁴¹ These problems were plainly rooted in Wheeler's cost-controlling attempts to shed jobs and downgrade labour's consultative role, which were an affront to the coalfield moral economy, and this position—management pushing the workers and unions towards confrontation—illuminates the character of the strike that followed from March 1984 to March 1985. This was clearly not predominantly a question of high politics and personalities, as the literature tends to indicate, but was more substantially the consequence of managerialist intervention.

The 'Pre-Wheeler' History of Management in the Nationalised Coal Industry in Scotland

Wheeler's cost-controlling initiatives, emphasising production performance and centralising control by rotating colliery managers, clearly antagonised employees in the early 1980s, but they were not unprecedented. Indeed, the longer pre-1979 history of the nationalised coal industry in Scotland contained many instances of centralised micro-management of pit-level operations, including production matters, from Area headquarters in Edinburgh. This, it should be emphasised, was in the context of the general restructuring of the industry that took place between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s. This concentrated operations on mechanised faces in a smaller number of larger pits. Pit closures on economic grounds were accepted by trade union representatives as part of the necessary 'retooling of the industry', as Willie Clarke puts it,⁴² but only, it should be emphasised, because the economic security of miners—and hence, the moral economy of the coalfields—was not challenged. Men were transferred from older and sometimes 'uneconomic' village pits to new, and significantly larger, 'cosmopolitan' collieries, so-called because they drew workers from an extended geographical locale. This sometimes involved the physical relocation of miners and their families, typically in the 1950s from Lanarkshire to Fife, but for most was a question of a daily bus journey from home to work. The emphasis on joint regulation and economic security partly softened the core legacies of the pre-1947 privately owned industry, highly adversarial workplace relations and trade union militancy.⁴³ But significant tensions re-emerged as an accelerated programme of closures from the mid-1960s coincided with rising unemployment and economic insecurity, across industrial Scotland generally, and in the coalfields especially. It was the newer, angry mood that led to the election of Michael McGahey, a communist, as NUMSA President in 1967, and it is no coincidence, perhaps, that the rate of pit closures—especially on economic grounds—subsequently decelerated thereafter. There was, in other words, a renewed moral economy insistence on joint regulation and employment security, particularly during and following the miners' victories in the 1972 and 1974 national strikes.⁴⁴

The restructuring of the 1950s and 1960s reflected the productionist emphasis adopted by the NCB across the British coalfield, under the chairmanship of James

Bowman in the 1950s and Alf Robens in the 1960s, and other national officials, notably William Bourne, Head of Coalface Mining Operations, and R.B. Dunn, Director-General of Mining, who acquired a substantial reputation after introducing mechanised power-loading of faces in the Scottish coalfields in the early 1950s.⁴⁵ Some 50 years later, Dunn's name was enough to elicit this strong response from one former mines surveyor and secretary of the Scottish Branch of the managers' union, the British Association of Colliery Management (BACM):

In about 1953, there was a mechanisation explosion right across the Board, whether the pits were ready for it or not, I have to say. And there was a gentleman [...] sent up from England somewhere, name of R. B. Dunn, and I've got to say, in terms of his remit that he had from his superiors down in London presumably, he was fairly ruthless [...] old ideas were shoved to the side [...] and these cutters came in quickly [...] They were introduced virtually overnight to a workforce that didn't know them and wasn't accustomed to them, and there was quite a bit of bad blood generated at that time about this ramrod style of management: 'They're going in whether you like it or not.'⁴⁶

As 40 per cent of coal in Scotland was being extracted from seams less than 3 feet thick, 20 per cent from faces on gradients exceeding 1 in 4, and with average face life less than a year in more than half of the Scottish coalfield, the introduction of large cutter-loader machines, costing £40,000 each, unsurprisingly met with little enthusiasm.⁴⁷ The NCB nevertheless adopted power-loading because it made production continuous, displacing semi-mechanised longwall methods where only one shift in three cut the coal, the other two clearing it and then securing the face for the next advance. Between January 1960 and May 1964, aided by the new Anderson Shearer loader, the proportion of coal power-loaded increased from 27.8 per cent of total Scottish output to 62.4 per cent.⁴⁸ Three important changes to the Scottish industry's political economy followed between 1947 and 1978–1979: materials and repairs rose from 16 to 20 per cent of costs, wage costs fell by 10 per cent and face working teams shrunk with the number working at the coalface more than halved.⁴⁹ Other effects, these unintended but predictable, given the emphasis on speed and scale, were a rise in accidents, and the exposure of face workers to elevated and hazardous levels of coal dust.⁵⁰ Workplace and intra-managerial tensions were consequently manifold. In 1957, the manager at Michael in East Fife, the largest pit in Scotland, was removed after failing to meet mechanisation targets; the manager at Kinglassie, also in East Fife, met the same experience in 1961 when he refused to threaten employees with the pit's closure unless productivity increased;⁵¹ and at Polkemmet in West Lothian, regarded by area management as exemplifying the potential of semi-mechanised faces, there were regular industrial disputes by the early 1960s, arising from the lowering of face worker earnings that followed power loading.⁵² Workplace problems and the pressure for productivity gains were further compounded by ill-founded development schemes, such as the Rothes and Glenochil. Pit-level managers and miners alike believed that these projects, fatally flawed by underground difficulties, would have been avoided had local knowledge been utilised by area management rather than ignored.⁵³

New wage payment methods amplified the centralising pressures, initially through the replacement of local with national bonuses, linked to targets calculated on time studies and rates of advance, followed by the 1966 National Power Loading Agreement, which abolished bonuses and established a national day wage scale for all grades of workers across the British coalfield. These uniform targets—focusing on output and rate of advance—were calculated centrally from a formula developed by Ernst Schumacher, a senior economist at the NCB, which ignored colliery-level factors, and involved increasing supervision which the NCB centrally felt was ‘not sufficiently intense’ in Scotland.⁵⁴ In the future, coal production was also to be heavily concentrated in large collieries and on smaller numbers of faces. Managers at Scottish collieries unable to adapt rapidly to mechanisation were advised by senior NCB officials to prepare for closures and transfer of employees to mechanised workings elsewhere, for there would be ‘no place in the economy for gross losers.’⁵⁵ Alongside these production- and lost earnings-related tensions, if not necessarily directly caused by them, came various expressions of ‘workplace deviance’, rising absenteeism and alleged ‘vandalism’ among young miners, especially in Fife, perhaps a reflection of ‘perceptions of injustice’ in the coalfields.⁵⁶

The trend towards concentration of production was extended in the 1970s by advanced technology mining forms, such as remotely operated longwall faces and then the mine operating system—accompanied by the Comprehensive Day Wage Structure, introduced in 1975—with operational management provided by centrally compiled data and forecasts.⁵⁷ Under new colliery organisation and production planning, ‘management’, announced R. B. Dunn, after becoming Director-General of Production in the early 1970s, ‘is only needed when a change is required, otherwise systems could be applied to do to-day what they did yesterday’. Dunn publicly looked forward to the day when he could ‘control some coal faces from my desk in London.’⁵⁸ These processes were accompanied from 1977 by production-related area incentive pay schemes, against opposition from union representatives in Kent, South Wales, Yorkshire and Scotland, who emphasised that the subsequent emergence of substantial area bonus differentials arose from the comparative ease of coal-getting in the more ‘productive’ areas.⁵⁹

The outgoing Scottish Area Director in 1980, Jimmy Cowan, was sanguine about the industry’s future in Scotland. The 18 collieries left would be joined by a new pit, Castlebridge in West Fife, which would feed the mighty Longannet power station on the Forth Estuary near Kincardine, and economies of scale would follow underground link-ups between Bogside and Kinneil, also tributaries to Longannet, and Seafield and Frances in East Fife. Seafield exhibited, however, the problem of further concentration in Scotland, with mechanised faces on gradients as severe as 1 in 1.1.⁶⁰ A future manager who began as a miner at Seafield described working under such conditions: ‘I was a strong, physical man but even one trip up that face and you were knackered because the temperature was high. You were working in temperatures in the 90s and a gradient of 1 in 1. It was physically punishing.’⁶¹ Similar recollections appear in the memoirs of Ian Terris, a supervisory employee at Seafield.⁶² Cowan would also have

been aware of growing tensions and differences of opinions not simply between the NCB and the NUM, but between managers themselves.⁶³

Two further points become apparent from managers' reflections on the pre-Wheeler changes: first, the 1972 and 1974 strikes affected and in some cases hardened attitudes against the workforce; and second, along with broader social changes, this was often manifested in generational differences.⁶⁴ J. R. Collins, a Deputy Colliery Mechanical Engineer at Comrie in West Fife, writing in 1974, sympathised with the miner who 'has to spend his working day in conditions which, to say the least, are unpleasant and cannot be compared with the relative comforts of factories or shop floors', but made frequent jibes about 'long haired layabouts'.⁶⁵ The Deputy Director of the Scottish Area by 1978, George Gillespie, declared in his address to the Mining Institute of Scotland that year, 'if there are those in our midst who think the going is too rough and would stand aside and observe, so be it'.⁶⁶ Gillespie subsequently blamed industrial discord on young miners who he considered 'hotheads', not like the 'reasonable' older union officials he could talk to over a cup of tea.⁶⁷ Though some managers, such as McAlpine, were not necessarily comfortable with Wheeler or Wheelerism, they disapproved of what they saw as the young 'sensitive, volatile and impressionable' elements now dominating the workforce.⁶⁸ Other mining professionals laid the blame elsewhere. Mines surveyor and BACM secretary, Alistair Moore, observed: 'I've got to say that some of the friction at colliery level was caused by the attitude of management. And that's because some managers were more manpower friendly than others.'⁶⁹

So the concentration of production and subsequent productivity drives from the mid-1950s onwards created turmoil and insecurity within the Scottish coalfields, further encouraging divisions between the NCB and the NUM, managers and miners, and between different levels of management. While Wheelerism, combined with Thatcherism, undoubtedly deviated from the past, the strategy was not unprecedented. Another important factor in Wheeler's development and an element in the continuity of this story is located in his experience in Derbyshire, working under Dunn, the arch-centralising production planner. It is hard not to imagine Wheeler as an ambitious young mining engineer cultivating the approval of this senior manager, who had served in Scotland and was clearly destined for the national board.⁷⁰

Assessing the Impact of Wheelerism

The preceding section established the dangers of over-exaggerating the changes to the management of the nationalised coal industry wrought by Albert Wheeler in Scotland after 1979. To these might be added the observation that in the composure of memories—of one-time union activists and managers alike—further distorting effects might be traced. Managers still in the industry in the 1980s might, in constructing their narratives, have privileged those strands of earlier experience that pointed to the antecedents of Wheeler's centralising productionism. Union activists, conversely, and viewing Wheeler's 'regime' as the terminal influence on 'their' industry, might, in constructing their narratives, have overestimated the transformative nature of

developments after 1979. There were, however, two unmistakable changes under Wheeler, whose approach transgressed the moral economy of the coalfield, and represented a decisive turn in managerial style in the industry. The following paragraphs examine each of these shifts in turn.

Centralisation and productionism in the 1950s and 1960s were sources of disharmony in the coalfield, as was the substantial volume of closures. The 1950 *Plan For Coal* projected reduced manpower of 7 per cent from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s: nearly 37 per cent—or 31,000 jobs—duly resulted. In the 1960s, as a whole the workforce was halved to 28,000 and then halved again to 14,000 or so on the eve of the 1984–1985 strike.⁷¹ This had a punishing impact on coal communities, as Daniel Wight's perceptive study of a central Scotland ex-mining village demonstrates,⁷² particularly as closures broadly affected smaller pits, often embedded in relatively small, economically homogeneous urban settlements.⁷³ Yet these processes—including the emphasis on production—were accepted by miners, because of their joint industrial basis, established with the full agreement of the workforce and its union representatives.⁷⁴ Job losses were eased, it bears repeating, by the existence of alternative forms of employment in the 1960s and 1970s for miners who did not favour transfer to other pits. These were the core expectations of the moral economy of the coalfield: changes would only come through agreement, and economic and employment security would be preserved. Wheeler's approach, in stark contrast, with unilateral closures and downgraded joint industrial governance, and in the context in the early 1980s of a substantial escalation of unemployment, particularly among male manual workers, plainly contravened this moral economy. Wheeler's view of collieries, as economic units that had to pay their way, was a further assault on this moral economy, which valued pits and jobs differently, as social resources to be nurtured and preserved for the benefit of the community. Incrementally shorn of these assets from the mid-1980s onwards, coal—or rather, ex-coal—communities in Scotland, as elsewhere in the UK, have greatly been damaged and remain troubled in the early twenty-first century.⁷⁵

This community hardship was anticipated by Wheeler's opponents, and explained the hostility of the coalfield crowd that he encountered when announcing closures, notably at Polmaise Colliery in Fallin, Stirlingshire, in January 1984, and at Cardowan, the previous May,⁷⁶ where, in the memory of one witness, he experienced the indignity of an ice cream cone being squashed into his clothes. It is also evident in the union narrative of the post-strike closures, including those lost to flooding and other avoidable disasters.⁷⁷ This represented criminal activity, according to Eric Clarke, who contrasts what he sees as the abandonment of major social resources, for which Wheeler was rewarded through promotion in the NCB and its privatised successor, the British Coal Corporation, with the allegedly punitive treatment of strikers arrested and convicted on public order charges in 1984 and 1985 for relatively minor picket-line offences.⁷⁸ This narrative is developed by Nicky Wilson with the specific charge that Wheeler was criminally negligent in ordering that the electricity at Polkemmet be switched off in August 1984. The consequence was that the pit was flooded, and some

£300 million worth of public assets were lost.⁷⁹ The fault lines among managers were no less visible, with some supportive of Wheeler's approach and others fundamentally opposed. Bill Marshall, an under-manager at Seafield during the strike, disapproved of the 'political expediency' of not imposing job cuts earlier, perhaps before 1980.⁸⁰ On the other hand, BACM official Alistair Moore, in 1984–1985 a senior mines surveyor at the Scottish area headquarters, recalled a bitter argument with Wheeler about Polkemmet, even turning Ian MacGregor's anti-union 'enemies within' rhetoric, borrowed from Margaret Thatcher's characterisation of the NUM leadership,⁸¹ on its head. 'There was enemies within our ranks', he said:

I had a meeting with the Director [Wheeler] when I asked that we [BACM members] should be allowed to go into Polkemmet [...] with a plea to allow management to go in to keep the pit open, man the pumps, ventilation, that sort of thing. No work, just keep the pit available for when the men got their strike differences settled. And I'll never forget Bert Wheeler's response to me was, 'if your members [...] want to do the jobs of pump men and winding enginemen, I'll see that's what they'll do when the strike ends.'⁸²

This, it should be emphasised, was an enormously difficult issue for BACM members. The organisation's rules explicitly barred them from carrying out the duties of mineworkers in the event of an NUM stoppage, although some of their number had done so in the past,⁸³ and some are thought to have been willing to do so—happily following Wheeler's direction—in 1984–1985. Moore's dissent, however, was not isolated. Ned Smith, the NCB's Industrial Relations Director, loathed the way that MacGregor courted favour with the government by seeking the 'grinding defeat' of his employees, and took early retirement before the end of the strike;⁸⁴ Phillip Weekes, South Wales Area Director, refused a direction from MacGregor to threaten his employees with instant dismissal if they did not resume work.⁸⁵ Yet Wheeler's approach, while both pioneering and divisive in Scotland, was adopted across the UK coalfield more broadly after the strike, and in promoted posts he led this process himself, devising in 1986 a plan that tasked colliery managers with attaining cost, as opposed to production, targets. The 'Wheeler Plan', concentrating production further on small numbers of heavily capitalised, longwall retreating faces, prepared the industry for privatisation and led to further closures, especially in Kent, the North East of England, Scotland and South Wales. By 1991, Scotland was left with just a small pit at Longannet, which subsequently closed after an inrush of water in 2002. The 'Wheeler Plan' also appeared to envisage weakening trade unions, longer working hours, the erosion of health and safety standards, and increased supervision.⁸⁶

Wheeler's management style, abrasive, anti-union and thereby combining unitary practices with unitary attitudes, was the second distinctive feature of the post-1979 environment. Alan Fox developed the concept of unitary-oriented management in the 1960s, bemoaning how pluralist industrial relations practices, geared to resolving the inevitable and legitimate differences that arose in organisations between employers and employees, were compromised by the unitary attitude—or frame of reference—adopted by many business leaders. Such leaders tended to regard the notion of distinct

employee interests as illegitimate, and resented negotiating authority in their organisations with representatives of the workforce. This discouraged the meaningful resolution of workplace differences.⁸⁷ The political strength of Labour in the 1960s, with economic growth and low unemployment, ensured that pluralist collective bargaining practices remained live and reasonably healthy, although the continuing attachment of the large body of employers to managerial sovereignty was evident in the 1970s. The Labour government elected in 1974 entertained proposals for worker directors on the boards of large private sector manufacturing companies. These were vehemently resisted by the Confederation of British Industry and the chairmen of several large multinationals, including ICI, Courtaulds and Shell UK, and largely on what Fox would have recognised as unitary grounds.⁸⁸ In the 1980s, in the context of labour's dwindling political strength, the practical support for pluralist collective bargaining and other joint industrial mechanisms among employers and managers duly fell significantly away.⁸⁹

The new industrial relations environment in the early 1980s reflected, of course, the emergent political and economic discourse of Thatcherism. In the NCB, these changes in political economy and industrial relations were symbolised by the appointment in the summer of 1983 as Chairman of Ian MacGregor. His authoritarian and anti-union perspectives on industrial life, including workplace relations, were shaped by the early, pre-Second World War mentoring influence of Sir James Lithgow, the Clydeside shipbuilder and arch-critic of trade unionism, and he came to the NCB after three decades in US business, via the British Steel Corporation, with a well-earned reputation as a ruthless, job-shredding union buster.⁹⁰ Wheeler, it should be reiterated, had pioneered the new, hyper-unitary approach in the NCB, moving against the NUM in Scotland at least a year before MacGregor's arrival. His management style was shaped to 'fit', as HRM scholars might put it,⁹¹ the new political economy environment: the apparent need for enhanced competitive advantage of price in the energy provision market required bearing down firmly on labour costs.

Conclusion

This article has illuminated understanding of the 1984–1985 miners' strike and the linkage between managerial 'style' and political economy by examining Albert Wheeler's initiatives as Scottish Director of the NCB between 1980 and 1984 in the longer historical perspective of the management of the coal sector in Scotland after nationalisation in 1947. The evidence demonstrates that Wheeler's centralising micro-management of pit-level operations and his determined bottom line focus on production and costs had substantial historical antecedents. From the 1950s and 1960s, in the context of major industrial restructuring, including pit closures and job losses on economic grounds, there was abundant intervention on operational matters from area headquarters in Edinburgh. The authority of pit-level management was recurrently undermined by central directives on production and cost, and the introduction of different managerial personnel, often from firth of the Scottish

coalfield altogether. These initiatives strained but did not transgress the moral economy of the coalfield in Scotland: changes, even those involving lost employment, were generally achieved by joint industrial agreement, and accepted by union representatives as necessary to the longer term health of the industry, enabling investment in the new 'cosmopolitan' collieries, with mechanised and more productive faces. These initiatives were pursued, moreover, in the context of relatively stable employment conditions elsewhere in the economy: miners who had to leave the coal industry were able to find relatively well-paid work in other manual sectors.

This explains why Wheeler's initiatives remain highly distinctive. They were introduced in a different political economy context, and imposed unilaterally on an unwilling workforce. Coal faced competitive pressures in the 1950s and 1960s, and these were renewed with greater intensity in the early 1980s after a temporary lull arising from the escalation of oil prices from 1973 onwards. A discourse of an uncompetitive, high-cost coal industry developed, encouraged by the Conservative government elected in 1979, which fostered too a parallel discourse of monopoly trade union power as the key source of this allegedly poor competitive position. There were alternative analyses of coal economics and NCB finances, including Glyn's insistence that the 'costs' of coal-getting plainly included expensive items that were unrelated to the price of the continuing and future activity of coal production. But these analyses were lost amid the increasingly predominant Thatcherite discourses of inefficient public enterprise and overbearing trade union power.

Wheeler's approach matched these predominant discourses, and the new political economy environment that shaped them, eschewing doubts about the economics of coal production. Pursuing the logic of the high-cost/trade union prisoner narrative of the nationalised coal industry in Scotland, he closed the highest 'loser' pits and sought to transform the economics of those that remained by radically reducing labour costs through dismantling joint industrial regulation. He did so, it bears repeating, in advance of like-minded managers elsewhere in the British coalfield. Pit-level disputes were provoked, union representatives harassed and employees demoralised or angered. Miners expected that further closures would result in their own long-term unemployment, for alternative manual employment was increasingly limited in Scotland in the 1980s, in the context of large-scale industrial restructuring. The great but doomed strike of 1984–1985 in Scotland was duly much more the product of Wheelerism than Thatcherism, and it certainly had little to do with 'Scargillism'. Wheeler's distinct managerial style, unitary in practice as well as attitude, to use Alan Fox's conceptualisation, was tailored to suit Thatcherite political economy. It fundamentally transgressed, moreover, the moral economy of the Scottish coalfield, with its expectations of joint industrial regulation and collective economic security, and its characterisation of pits as social resources rather than mere industrial units.

Notes

- [1] Adeney and Lloyd, *Miners' Strike*, 101, 120, 140–2; Winterton, 'The 1984–85 Miners' Strike and Technological Change', 5–14.

- [2] Perchard, *Mine Management Professions*, 216–264.
- [3] Beckett and Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line*; Cooper and Hopper, *Debating Coal Closures*; Stewart, ‘A Tragic “Fiasco”?’.
- [4] Francis, *History On Our Side*; Gildart, *North Wales Miners*; Griffin, ‘Notts. have some very peculiar history’.
- [5] Howell, Politics of the NUM.
- [6] Beynon, *Digging Deeper*; Richards, *Miners on Strike*; Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*.
- [7] Adeney and Lloyd, *Miners’ Strike*, 185; Taylor, *NUM and British Politics*, 243.
- [8] TNA, Kew, COAL 74/4783, Coal Industry National Consultative Council Minutes, 6 March 1984.
- [9] Brotherstone and Pirani, ‘Were There Alternatives?’.
- [10] Phillips, ‘Workplace Conflict’.
- [11] Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd’.
- [12] Hutton, *The State We’re In*.
- [13] Fox, *Industrial Sociology and Industrial Relations*.
- [14] Millward and Stevens, *British Workplace Industrial Relations*, 36–53, 151–65.
- [15] Boxall and Purcell, *Strategy and Human Resource Management*, 7–9; Legge, *Human Resource Management*, 70–100.
- [16] ‘Iraq—Declaration of War—18 March 2003 at 22.00’, <http://www.publicwhip.org.uk/division.php?date=2003-03-18>, accessed 17 June 2010.
- [17] David Hamilton, Interview with Jim Phillips, Parliamentary Advice Office, Dalkeith, 30 September 2009.
- [18] Summerfield, ‘Dis/composing the Subject’.
- [19] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*.
- [20] Wheeler, ‘Leaders in the Making’, 564.
- [21] Eric Clarke, Interview with Jim Phillips, SMM, Newtongrange, 25 August 2009.
- [22] Denholm, ‘Mick McGahey’.
- [23] Nicky Wilson, Interview with Jim Phillips, Scottish Miners’ Convalescent Home, Blair Castle, Culross, 18 August 2009.
- [24] Wheeler, ‘Leaders in the Making’, 564; Perchard, *Mine Management*, 184–204.
- [25] Torrance, *We in Scotland*, passim.
- [26] Wheeler, ‘Leaders in the Making’.
- [27] Morgan, *People’s Peace*, 346–51.
- [28] Robinson and Marshall, *What Future for British Coal?*.
- [29] Ashworth, *British Coal Industry*, 414–15.
- [30] MMC, *National Coal Board*, Vol. 1, 363–6.
- [31] Cutler et al., ‘Aberystwyth Report’.
- [32] Glyn, ‘Economic Case against Pit Closures’, 58–60.
- [33] TNA, COAL 31/824, Wheeler to Siddall, 16 November 1982; NAS, CB 335/14/1, Kinneil Colliery: Note of an informal meeting with the NUM held on Tuesday, 14 December 1982 in the Board Room, Hobart House; TNA, COAL 89/222, J. Mills to Lawrence Daly, 17 December 1982.
- [34] MMC, *National Coal Board*, Vol. 1, 380–2.
- [35] Iain Chalmers, Interview with Jim Phillips, Cowdenbeath, 30 July 2009.
- [36] Willie Clarke, Interview with Jim Phillips, Ballingry, 13 November 2009.
- [37] NAS, CB 398/3/2, NCB Scottish area, Seafeld Colliery, Minutes of Colliery Consultative Committee (CCC), 28 June 1983, 12 July 1983 and 17 January 1984.
- [38] Hamilton, Interview.

- [39] NAS, CB 363/17/12, Minutes of Meeting between Management and Trade Union Representatives, Monktonhall Colliery, 25 August 1983; *The Scotsman*, 14 October 1983.
- [40] NAS, CB 229/3/1, NCB Scottish Area, Bilston Glen Colliery, CCC, 7 September, 4 October and 2 November 1983; CB 221/3/4, Barony CCC, 11 January 1983, 5 April 1983, 23 August 1983; CB 328/3/4, Killoch CCC, 14 June 1983, 4 October 1983.
- [41] SMM, Newtongrange, NUM Scottish Area, Minute of Special Conference of Delegates, 3 November 1983; Executive Committee, and Minute of Special Conference of Delegates, both 13 February 1984.
- [42] Willie Clarke, Interview.
- [43] Campbell, *Scottish Miners*.
- [44] Phillips, *Industrial Politics of Devolution*, 117–41.
- [45] Perchard, *Mine Management*, 224–5.
- [46] Alistair Moore, Interview with Andrew Perchard, Bo'ness, 14 March 2004.
- [47] Wilson and Paterson, 'Problems of Coal-Face Mechanization', 280.
- [48] Perchard, 'Mine Management Professions', 227.
- [49] Crockett, 'Management of Men, Machinery and Money', 318 and 320.
- [50] McIvor and Johnston, *Miners' Lung*, 151, 244 and 249; Perchard, 'The Mine Management Professions and the Dust Problem', 87–110.
- [51] NAS, CB44/28, NCB, SD, Executive Committee, policy papers, 24 August 1957 and 17 December 1957; CB55/13, NCB, SD, Fife Area, Kinglassie Colliery Consultative Committee, 4 December 1961 and 26 May 1962.
- [52] Perchard, *Mine Management*, 367; Church and Outram, *Strikes and Solidarity*, Table 12.7.
- [53] Perchard, *Mine Management*, 250–262.
- [54] NAS, CB41/68, NCB, SD, EC, Note of meeting between E. F. Schumacher, H. E. Collins, and the Scottish Divisional Advisory Committee on Production and Area Production Managers, 6 July 1965.
- [55] NAS, CB41/68, NCB, SD, EC, policy papers, 29 June 1965.
- [56] NAS, CB55/9, NCB, SD, Fife Area, Fordell CCC, 7 April 1964 and 28 August 1964; CB55/13, NCB, SD, Fife Area, 19 October 1965; CB55/20, NCB, SD, Fife Area, Mary CCC, 21 October 1964 and 16 March 1965; Lawrence and Robinson, 'Ain't Misbehavin', 379–98.
- [57] Bourne, 'Advanced Technology Mining', 197; Winterton and Winterton, 'Production, Politics and Technological Development'.
- [58] Dunn, 'Mining Systems and their Developments', 359–360.
- [59] Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, 15–7.
- [60] Cowan, 'National Coal Board: Scottish Area in the 1980s', 20–1.
- [61] Bill Marshall, Interview with Andrew Perchard, Kirkcaldy, 21 April 2004.
- [62] Terris, *Twenty Years*, 96.
- [63] Dunn, 'Colliery Organization in the Future', 552.
- [64] Briggs, 'Review of the Seventies', 28.
- [65] Collins, 'The Colliery Engineer and his Men', 94 and 96.
- [66] Gillespie, 'Centenary Year', 514.
- [67] George Gillespie, Interview with Andrew Perchard, Newtongrange, 14 August 1999.
- [68] McAlpine, 'Some Aspects of Change', 470.
- [69] Moore, Interview.
- [70] Wheeler, 'Leaders in the Making', 564.
- [71] Perchard, *Mine Management*, 222, 240–1; Murray, *Scotland*, 58–9; Stewart, 'Tragic "Fiasco"', 38.
- [72] Wight, *Workers Not Wasters*.
- [73] Heughan, *Pit Closures*.
- [74] Eric Clarke, Interview; Willie Clarke, Interview.

- [75] EKOS, *Evaluation of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust*, 81; Strangleman, 'Networks, Place and Identities'; Critcher et al., *Out of the Ashes?*.
- [76] *Glasgow Herald* and *The Times*, both 14 May 1983.
- [77] Wilson, Interview.
- [78] Eric Clarke, Interview.
- [79] Wilson, Interview.
- [80] Bill Marshall, Interview.
- [81] MacGregor, *Enemies Within*.
- [82] Alistair Moore, Interview.
- [83] Perchard, *Mine Management*, 377–418.
- [84] Smith, *1984 Miners' Strike*, 69–70.
- [85] 'Obituary: Phillip Weekes', *The Times*, 3 July 2003.
- [86] Winterton, '1984–85 Miners' Strike and Technological Change', 12; Beynon et al., 'Decline of King Coal', 9; 'Wheeler Back in Charge of Scots Mining', *The Glasgow Herald*, 9 April 1991.
- [87] Fox, *Industrial Sociology and Industrial Relations*.
- [88] Phillips, 'Limited Reconstruction of Industrial Relations'.
- [89] Millward and Stevens, *British Workplace Industrial Relations*, 36–53, 151–65.
- [90] Cameron, *Impaled Upon a Thistle*, 329.
- [91] Boxall and Purcell, *Strategic Human Resource Management*, 56–84.

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