

THE SCOTTISH LABOUR HISTORY SOCIETY: A RETROSPECT

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Among the lines of convergent thinking that led eventually to the formation of the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH) and its *Bulletin* in 1960 was a little-known initiative from Scotland. In 1958, frustrated by the high politics bias of mainstream history, Ian MacDougall, a mature student and history undergraduate at Edinburgh University, floated the idea of a magazine or journal that would focus on the history of working people. With support from two of his university teachers, pioneer labour historian William Marwick and Victor Kiernan, leftwing professor of history, MacDougall wrote to several academic figures with a proven interest in labour and working-class history. Responses varied: while Douglas Cole and Alan Taylor were non-committal, Royden Harrison and Sidney Pollard were keen, and expressed an interest in being joint editors of such a publication.¹ Although this proposed venture did not materialize, it seems that at least some seeds were successfully planted, as the Sheffield duo were soon to emerge as *Bulletin* editors and stalwarts of the SSLH.

A number of Scots — Marwick, his son Arthur, Ken Alexander and Henry Hanak — joined the SSLH on or around its formation. It was formally launched in Scotland after a meeting in April 1961 at Edinburgh University staff club, when guest speaker Dorothy Thompson promoted the project for a Dictionary of Labour Biography and otherwise encouraged participation in the work of the Society. MacDougall, then a trainee teacher, was elected secretary of a Scottish Committee of the Society. It functioned for five years as a small body of activists and enthusiasts, without a formal structure or subscriptions. Financial support came from trade union donations, while MacDougall was general factotum and principal livewire, combining roles as secretary, treasurer, meetings organizer, fund-raiser, and leader of a collective project to trace and save surviving records of the labour movement in Scotland. He was to continue as secretary of the Scottish Labour History Society (SLHS), formally constituted in 1966 (it was, according to Hamish Fraser, ‘a friendly, mutually acceptable UDI’ from the parent body), and serve as its unstinting champion until the mid-1990s.² Marwick was elected first chairperson of the new body and was in later years its honorary president.

¹ Author’s discussion with Ian MacDougall, 27 January, 2009; see also W. Hamish Fraser, ‘Twenty Five Years’, *Scottish Labour History Journal*, 22 (1987), 7–10. I am indebted to Hamish for this most useful retrospective account of the Society in Scotland.

² Fraser, ‘Twenty Five Years’.

At the outset around 1960, the concept and practice of labour history in and of Scotland was still in its infancy and scarcely recognized as an academic subject. Academic students and political and trade union activists alike could benefit from existing publications on British working class movements—cum—labour history, including some fine recent work. If they were interested in finding a fuller treatment of the Scottish context, they were likely to be disappointed, for coverage was sometimes patchy or non-existent. An obvious explanation for such neglect stemmed from the problem that basic primary sources for further exploration of Scottish contexts and, in particular, for tackling special subject areas, were unknown, insufficient, or inaccessible to the researcher. Moreover, what was understood as labour history in and of Scotland was an underdeveloped notion, dominated by the longstanding and somewhat narrow orthodox approach which focused on the institutions, formal organizations and movements of the working class.

Within traditional universities in Scotland and beyond, the existence of an Anglo-centric or English chauvinist standpoint which relegated Scotland, and its labour movement, to the status of a regional case study or part of a peripheral 'Celtic Fringe', further hindered proper appraisal of the Scottish dimension. Until that obstructive mentality was seriously challenged, and key primary sources made available, there would be no reconstruction of the historical record of labour in Scotland. The publication of *Chartist Studies*, edited by Asa Briggs, in 1959, a text which opened fresh approaches to the character of this early movement at national, regional, and local levels throughout Britain, and included an important contribution on Glasgow, was at least a start. Moreover, in the preface to his magnum opus of 1963, Edward Thompson issued a courteous apology for neglecting the Scottish dimension, 'not out of chauvinism but out of respect', recognizing that its experience of class and culture was 'significantly different', requiring a separate treatment which he could not provide.³

As yet, however, only a handful of scholarly books were available on aspects of labour history with an exclusive or primary focus on Scotland, and all but one were of recent vintage. For the record, they included Gillespie's monograph on the printers' trade union, Wright's *Scottish Chartism*, Page Arnot's *History of the Scottish Miners* and Buckley's *Trade Unionism in Aberdeen*, the first important modern study of a single locality.⁴ For a substantial overview, the only publication and standard text remained *The History of the Working Classes in Scotland* by Tom Johnston, written when he was a prominent ILP socialist and editor of the weekly *Forward*. Half of this passionate, polemical, and competently researched 400-page book, first published in 1920 and re-issued several times until the 1960s, was devoted to coverage of the exploitation of the common people from medieval times to the end of the eighteenth century, including the theme of expropriation and clearance from the land. The second part of the text focused on

³ *Chartist Studies*, ed. by Asa Briggs (London: Macmillan, 1959); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963), pp. 13–14.

⁴ Sarah Gillespie, *A Hundred Years of Progress: The Record of the Scottish Typographical Association* (Glasgow: Published for the Association by Maclehose, 1953); Leslie C. Wright, *Scottish Chartism* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953); Robin Page Arnot, *A History of the Scottish Miners from the Earliest Times* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1955); and Kenneth D. Buckley, *Trade Unionism in Aberdeen, 1878–1900* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1955).

some early trade unions, radical movements from the 1790s to Chartism, and ended in the 1880s with the emergence of labourism and socialism.⁵

The scope of William Marwick's *Short History of Labour in Scotland* published in 1967, and billed as 'the first complete study', made it a very different book from Johnston's radical sweep through the centuries. His useful but slim 100-page narrative résumé of labour and associated movements from the eighteenth century to the 1960s was essentially a rather straightforward outline survey, which now looks curiously old-fashioned. Although he hinted occasionally where more scholarly work was required, his book reflected the current orthodox approach towards labour history, and contained no awareness of the possibilities of a Thompson-like history from below; of moves towards a social history of the working class; of enquiry into class, class relations, popular struggles, and radical culture; or, as would come in the 1970s, stimulated by resurgence of the national question and controversy about the historic relationship of the Scottish people within the British state, the need for investigation of the distinctive characteristics, peculiarities, and impact of the labour movement and of the working class in Scotland.⁶ Yet, to be fair to Marwick, his text was also the culmination of many years of personal and professional commitment to labour history within Scotland. Until retiring from Edinburgh University in 1964 at the age of seventy, he had done more than anyone else to raise the profile of the subject. As a young man in the 1920s, he was the first tutor organizer for the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) in Scotland, based mainly in Lanarkshire. He taught economics, trade union studies, and economic and labour history to worker-students, particularly from the iron and steel industries. In the 1930s, as a lecturer in extramural studies at Edinburgh University, and in Economic History from 1948, he developed academic research, teaching, and writing on Scottish labour history. He contributed several articles and pamphlets, although he found no time to write a major work on the subject.

For ten years, starting in 1953, Marwick was alone in conducting a pioneer course on the history of the working-class movement in Britain and Scotland, as a final-year special option within the honours degree in History at Edinburgh, while also promoting the subject in first- and second-year economic history courses.⁷ By the late 1960s, similar courses were commenced in other Scottish universities, notably at Strathclyde, and labour history began to take off as a recognized academic subject, instead of remaining a poor relation of economic history. Also, newly appointed staff in history, sociology, and politics departments and growing numbers of postgraduate students in those disciplines were engaging and exploring fresh perspectives in labour history research, and most were also becoming interested members of the Society.

⁵ Thomas Johnston, *The History of the Working Classes in Scotland* (Glasgow: Forward Publishing Co., 1929).

⁶ W. H. Marwick, *A Short History of Labour in Scotland* (Edinburgh and London: Chambers, 1967).

⁷ For William Marwick, see the tribute by Ian MacDougall in *Essays in Scottish Labour History*, ed. by Ian MacDougall (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1978), pp. ix–xi. For his WEA career, see Robert Duncan, 'Ideology and Provision: The WEA and the Politics of Workers' Education in Early Twentieth-Century Scotland', in *A Ministry of Enthusiasm: Centenary Essays on the Workers' Educational Association*, ed. by Stephen K. Roberts (London: Pluto Press, 2003), pp. 176–97. For a brief report of his pioneering courses in labour history at Edinburgh and a copy of an exam paper, see *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* (BSSLH), 4 (1962), 32–33, 36–37.

In the early 1960s, in common with the concern of the parent Society to pursue labour biography and bibliography, the Scottish Committee pursued innovative projects to build and expand the source base for labour history research and publications. Some members tape-recorded reminiscences of labour movement veterans, although such initiatives were slight and, as yet, somewhat amateurish, when compared to the skilled, and highly productive, efforts of MacDougall and other oral history practitioners from the 1970s. The main priority was a campaign to locate, list, and safeguard all types of surviving records of organizations and movements, as it was already apparent that many had been thrown out, destroyed, or were endangered. In 1963–64, MacDougall and a few active members undertook an initial survey and the secretary enlisted the support of academic and labour movement patrons, including the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) and the Scottish cooperative movement (SCWS), to promote the effort and publish the results. The *Interim Bibliography of the Scottish Working Class Movement* was published in 1965. It listed 1,500 items, giving a location for each, and included some important finds, such as the first volume of Glasgow Trades Council minutes from the late 1850s and of the Edinburgh Cabinetmakers' Union for the 1830s. This small publication, in duplicated format, was an influential start and served as a vital aid and stimulus to research.⁸

Moreover, it was a wake-up call to the whole trade union and labour movement to take responsibility for their records and archives and to cooperate with the ongoing campaign for their preservation. It was also clearly evident that a more sustained effort was required to complete anything like a comprehensive survey and listing of sources for a vast field of enquiry which, it was agreed, would cover all aspects of the experience of 200 years of popular radicalism and labour aspiration. As MacDougall remarked later, 'it seemed essential to try to follow this up this breakthrough by placing the project on a full-time basis. The death of James Dow, and the increasingly heavy commitments of George Monies, John Simpson, and Tony Southall, left me the only member of the original group to continue working on the project.'⁹

In November 1966, with STUC, Labour Party, and SCWS funding for six months, MacDougall began to work full-time searching for and listing records. He was based at the Economic History department at Strathclyde University, where Professor S. G. E. Lythe, who was then also chairman of the SLHS, encouraged and supported the project. Fortunately, MacDougall was allowed to continue in this capacity until September 1969, with Lythe helping to provide a research fellowship and secure an award from the Social Science Research Council. Although many members of the Scottish Society and other historians, librarians, and labour movement activists assisted with the enquiry and sometimes contributed specialist help with archival materials, it was MacDougall, and not the Society, who assumed responsibility for completing the protracted, and now gigantic,

⁸ *An Interim Bibliography of the Scottish Working-Class Movement, and of Other Labour Records held in Scotland*, ed. by Ian MacDougall (Edinburgh: Scottish Committee, Society for the Study of Labour History, 1965).

⁹ Ian MacDougall, in the Preface to *A Catalogue of Some Labour Records in Scotland and Some Scots Records Outside Scotland*, ed. and comp. by Ian MacDougall (Edinburgh: Scottish Labour History Society, 1978).

project. Indeed, he had to undertake six more years of voluntary effort to finish the systematic and monumental task of locating and listing all manner of sources throughout Scotland and beyond, and of encouraging and securing safe deposit of those hundreds of items that were at risk. There is no doubt that a great opportunity was lost here to create a dedicated archive of labour movement records for Scotland, comparable to the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University. Nevertheless, as a result of the project and accompanying campaign, large collections were saved and deposited in the National Library of Scotland, the Mitchell Library, Aberdeen University Library, and Dundee Public Library, as well as small collections housed elsewhere.

MacDougall compiled a massive database of countless thousands of entries as a work of reference, and edited it for possible publication. He then canvassed over 200 potential patrons (mainly from among individual members and subscribing organizations of the Society) to secure the costs of printing and publishing the results of this bibliographical project. The outcome was finally achieved in 1978. An enormous volume of 600 double-column pages was published under the name of MacDougall and the SLHS, and bearing the ridiculously modest title *A Catalogue of Some Labour Records in Scotland*.¹⁰ Many historians and other researchers are indebted to MacDougall for his immense achievement. More than thirty years later, despite the substantial updating of labour bibliography, this most unique publication remains an indispensable source. Also appearing in 1978, initiated by the Society and in conjunction with John Donald publishers, was the commissioned *Essays in Scottish Labour History*, which MacDougall edited.¹¹ This book was a fitting, if belated, tribute to the eighty-four-year old William Marwick, and the collected essays were an important contribution to the subject and the Society's profile.

Perspectives

For the Scottish Committee and its Scottish Society successor, promoting the study of the history of the working class, its organizations and aspirations, and the academic development of labour history, were agreed primary aims. However, focus on the Scottish component has never been parochial and inward-looking. In our publications, conferences and other activities, the scope of historical enquiry and the active interest of authors and participants have often encompassed international connections and perspectives. Moreover, the SLHS has always seen itself as part of the broad labour movement, and variously identified with its purposes and struggles. Labour historians and others who joined the SLHS and contributed to its activities have reflected a range of academic interests and different political persuasions. However, among them are many who are, or were, convinced socialists who turned to history, research and exposition, seeking to confirm, validate, and illustrate the reality of the class struggle, while being typically concerned to grasp a fuller understanding of the present and future prospects of labour as a rationale for their own political engagement. Over the years such concerns have

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ MacDougall, *Essays in Scottish Labour History*.

sometimes been raised within the SLHS, including the extent to which the Society should make an explicit political commitment.

Yet, according to the record, and my own recollection over twenty-five years, there was only one attempt to pressurize the SLHS into taking a declared stance on a current issue facing the labour movement, or on any other contemporary political issue. This particular challenge came from the hard left at the 1969 AGM, when a motion condemning Barbara Castle's White Paper, *In Place of Strife*, was put and passed. Chairman Lythe immediately resigned on the grounds that such interventions of a politically partisan nature were unconstitutional and inimical to the interests of the Society. A motion was then put that no action be taken on the resolution condemning the White Paper. The motion was carried, Lythe withdrew his resignation and the status quo prevailed.¹² The unwritten ruling on those matters then, and since, respects the right of members and affiliates to decide to take whatever political action they deem necessary in their personal or other capacities outside the confines of the SLHS.

Here, I can concur with the judicious verdict of former chairperson Professor Hamish Fraser that 'the decision to pull back from the road of clear political commitment may have helped maintain much of the Society's character. A certain fudging has given members a freedom to place the emphasis where they wish, on the *Labour History Society* or the *Labour History Society*.'¹³ In this respect, it can be stated clearly that, over many years, one of the strengths of the SLHS has been good links with, and support from, various sections and individuals within the trade union and labour movement, as expressed in subscriptions, sponsorship of publications, donations in money and in kind (as for instance, accommodation for meetings and conferences and, in the STUC case, conference mailings to its affiliated organizations), and participation in events.

New growth

In the late 1960s, there were signs of growing interest in the work of the SLHS, including participation in up to three meetings a year to hear papers and discuss topics, and a successful touring exhibition of banners, books, photographs and other documents on Scottish working class history, which attracted over 2,000 visitors at six venues.¹⁴ Encouraged by a rising membership of over 100 subscribing individual members and affiliated organizations from among historians and the labour movement, the SLHS decided to launch its own *Journal* in May 1969, albeit on an experimental basis. Instead of continuing to rely on the *Bulletin* to report SLHS activities, this new venture aimed not only to serve as a newsletter but to create a forum and outlet within Scotland for publication of serious work on all aspects of working-class history. Hamish Fraser, its first editor, joked that the in-house production was 'initially a one-man operation of

¹² Fraser, 'Twenty Five Years'; *BSSLH*, 19 (1969), 12; and MacDougall's minute in Scottish Labour History Society Business, 1969–72, National Library of Scotland (NLS), Special Collections, Accession 7554, Box 16.4.

¹³ Fraser, 'Twenty Five Years'.

¹⁴ W. Hamish Fraser and A. Allan MacLaren, 'Scottish Report and Conference Report', *BSSLH*, 14 (1967), 10–13.

editing, typing, binding, and getting it posted', but actually depended very much upon the support of colleagues in the History department at the University of Strathclyde.¹⁵

Yet, reproduced from typewriting and staple-bound, and containing a wide range of articles, plus reviews and reports, *The Scottish Labour History Society Journal* survived and flourished. It more than achieved its declared purposes under the assiduous editorship of Hamish Fraser (1969–74) and the Edinburgh-based Ian Wood (1975–87). Not surprisingly, articles and continuing debate among several historians who, from the late 1960s, had pioneered research and published work on the controversial 'Red Clydeside' featured most prominently in the *Journal* throughout those years. It remained in this modest format until, starting from issue 23 in 1988, it was transformed into an attractive, professionally printed journal and, since issue 24, with perfect binding. In this endeavour, we are grateful to our contracted printer friends at Clydeside Press for more than twenty years of expertise and cooperation.

Regular production of the *Journal*, more or less annually, and its circulation to subscribers in Scotland, the rest of Britain and beyond, undoubtedly contributed to the expanding profile of the SLHS during the 1970s and 1980s, when membership climbed steadily to around 250 individuals and organizations. However, other activities and projects, continuing or new, and either associated with the SLHS or directly initiated by it, also boosted its development during that most trying period for the labour movement. For instance, exhibitions on Scottish labour history were featured in public museums at Dalkeith and Edinburgh, the latter initiative feeding into formation of a people's history museum in the capital city. There were also several major oral history projects, under the principal direction of Ian MacDougall, spawning significant publications, which he compiled and edited. They included *Militant Miners* (1981), featuring the outstanding recollections of miners' leader John McArthur, from the Fife coalfield; *Voices from the Spanish Civil War* (1986), which collected together memories of International Brigade veterans from Scotland; and in 1990 and 1991, *Voices from the Hunger Marches*, in two volumes, covering the reminiscences of participants from campaigns against unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁶

From 1983 to 1985, the SLHS was a sponsoring partner, along with the STUC and some trade unions, in a Manpower Services Commission-funded oral history project, based in Edinburgh and South-East Scotland. Again, reporting back to the SLHS committee, MacDougall was heavily involved, helping to train and manage the six people who were employed to interview 300 informants, and record and transcribe their recollections of working life and trade union activities from the early twentieth century.¹⁷ That this project was only partially successful was neither the fault of MacDougall nor the SLHS. However, in later years, outside SLHS auspices, he selected and edited

¹⁵ Fraser, 'Twenty Five Years'; see also idem, 'The Scottish Labour History Society Journal', *Scottish Labour History Society Journal*, 25 (1990), 86–87.

¹⁶ *Militant Miners: Recollections of John MacArthur, Buckhaven, and Letters, 1924–26, of David Proudfoot, Methil*, ed. by Ian MacDougall (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1981); *Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, ed. by Ian MacDougall (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986); *Voices from the Hunger Marches: Personal Recollections by Scottish Hunger Marchers of the 1920s and 1930s, vols 1 and 2*, ed. by Ian MacDougall (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990 and 1991).

¹⁷ Reported in Correspondence and Papers of the Scottish Labour History Society, for 1983–86, NLS, Accession 10482.

the best results from its 500 hours of taped materials to produce further publications on working lives. By then, he was well on the way to becoming the Studs Terkel of Scottish labour history.¹⁸

The themes and methods of enquiry mentioned above were also the subject of impressive, and sometimes large, SLHS conferences held twice yearly in Glasgow and Edinburgh during the 1980s. For many, the highlight was the autumn 1986 conference to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Spanish Civil War. Over 180 participants crowded into Edinburgh City Chambers to hear Victor Kiernan and guest speaker Hywel Francis, from the Welsh Labour History Society; to view film and video documentary produced in Scotland, featuring archive footage and interviews with International Brigade volunteers; and to witness a final session with a panel of veterans recalling and discussing the significance of their experiences.¹⁹

Also during the 1980s, one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken by the SLHS was its partnership role in the making of *Pioneers of Socialism*, a series of four 30-minute programmes by the Edinburgh-based Skyline Productions for Channel 4 Television. It was conceived in 1980 by John Grant, a member of the SLHS, and producer of documentary films who had worked for the legendary John Grierson and Forsyth Hardy. A long time in the making, this project was secured only after Grant, Ian MacDougall and Gordon Wilson, then SLHS chairperson, among others, were involved in some difficult and protracted negotiations on programme content, fees to the Society, and consultancy payments to those members, including scriptwriter Murdoch Rodgers and leading labour historians, who contributed to the series.

In its final form, this relatively low-budget but well-produced drama documentary series encompassed the rise of the labour movement from the 1880s until the 1930s, as seen through the lives of some of the major figures in Scottish (and British) Labour, namely Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald, John Maclean, and James Maxton. The series was broadcast at peak time over four Saturdays in February and March 1987. Viewing figures rose from an initial 450,000 to 900,000, while press reaction and viewer feedback was healthy. Made available on VHS videotape, many members promoted its widespread use in colleges and schools, in WEA history and trade union studies classes in the West of Scotland, and at SLHS events.

Expansion: a new phase

Despite such encouraging developments, there was no inclination to rest on past achievements. We planned the twenty-fifth anniversary conference of the SLHS in Glasgow in spring 1986 as an open forum for members to take stock of the Society's activities and roles, and decide on priorities to expand its profile even further. It was decided to adopt a more active, campaigning stance, not only because the labour movement was increasingly under attack from hostile political forces, but as the place of labour history

¹⁸ This attribution is not mine, but that of Dr Bill Knox, in his review of MacDougall, *Voices from the Hunger Marches*, vol. 1: see *Scottish Labour History Journal*, 26 (1991), 87–88.

¹⁹ A short conference report is in *Scottish Labour History Journal*, 22 (1987), 4.

in the world of education and elsewhere in the public domain was also felt to be under threat. In response, the Society had an obvious role to muster its meagre resources to defend labour history interests and, where possible, to stage a meaningful counter offensive. The SLHS was at that time fortunate in having Dr Jim Treble, a historian at Strathclyde University, and its most outstanding and longest-serving treasurer, to look after growing subscriptions and revenues, and ensure that finance for any proposed additional outlays was safely in place.

The incoming committee (1986–87) launched several initiatives to meet the objectives outlined above. It decided to move to a larger, professionally printed journal, by inviting and commissioning more major articles, and thereby boosting the academic profile of the subject. However, to complement this effort, and again contracting the services of Clydeside Press, it also decided to publish an illustrated magazine-style *Scottish Labour History Review*, which, it was hoped, would have a popular appeal, and be part of a recruitment drive to attract new members. Informative and propagandist, it was to carry less formal, short features and articles, reports, and news and views items, which would cover SLHS activities and concerns, reflect the struggles of the contemporary labour movement, and publicize the activities of other bodies who were promoting labour and people's history, and related cultural work, mainly within Scotland. From 1987 onwards, preparation and publication of the *Journal* and *Review* was the responsibility of an editorial collective, who were to spread more evenly the consequent increased workload.

Both publications were sent to subscribing members of the Society, but around another 500 copies of the attractive 20-page A4 size *Review* was sold directly at 50p a copy, in workplaces, colleges, leftwing bookshops, various community-based outlets, and at conferences and events of SLHS and other sympathetic organizations. Douglas Allen, activist, history and media studies lecturer, and SLHS chairperson during 1986–88, was principal designer, editor, and extensive contributor throughout the eleven issues of the *Review* which appeared between autumn 1987 and 1999. Although assisted by colleagues in the editorial collective he, above all, was responsible for this quality production, which can be attributed to his creative talents, his commitment to wider participation in labour history 'from below' and to popular radical and socialist culture. With great reluctance, the magazine was discontinued, as many outlets for distribution and sale had begun to close down or disappear by the late 1990s. Nevertheless, for ten years or so, it had served its purpose to attract new members to the Society and stimulate wider interest in labour history and related issues. However, since 1998, issues of an expanded and more conveniently titled *Scottish Labour History* have continued the traditional journal content, and incorporated a 'News and Views' section contributed by Douglas Allen.

Efforts to generate wider participation in studying and documenting the lived experience and struggles of working people also included attempts to form local or regional branches and groups of the SLHS. During 1985–86, a West of Scotland group convened a series of evening seminars in Glasgow, providing opportunities for SLHS members to deliver talks and discuss work in progress. However, the only SLHS group or branch to be formed and sustained outside the dominant Glasgow–Edinburgh axis was in Dundee where, for several years after 1987, successful annual conferences were organized by Iain Flett, city archivist, with regular support from Chris Whatley and other historians at Dundee University. Ken Lunn, based at Portsmouth Polytechnic, gathered a nucleus

of support for an outreach branch of SLHS in the south of England in 1989, but unfortunately the initiative failed to get off the ground.²⁰

Some of us, influenced by the example and methods of the History Workshop movement and progressive practices of teaching and learning in adult and worker education, were particularly keen to embark on a different type of initiative to widen participation. Our ambition was to form via the SLHS, labour history workshops involving a mix of professional or trained historians and non-academic participants, who were interested in pursuing an active commitment to collective research and publication projects. These workshops would then affiliate to the SLHS. The Glasgow Labour History Workshop, started in 1987, and coordinated by Dr Arthur McIvor at Strathclyde University, was the most important outcome of this approach. The Workshop emerged from participants at a labour history evening class, and included lay historians and activists who were already SLHS members or closely associated. They chose to investigate and reassess aspects of the abiding controversy around 'Red Clydeside' before and during the First World War. Their first collective research project, conducted over eighteen months, was to document and analyse a significant episode involving women workers and revolutionary socialists at the American-owned giant Singer plant, Clydebank. Their enquiry, which included extensive work among newspaper sources and use of oral history methods, resulted in an eighty-page publication.²¹

Next, the Glasgow Labour History Workshop, together with the SLHS, conceived and produced a volume of essays in honour of one of the last 'Red Clydesiders', Harry McShane. This publication, edited by Robert Duncan and Arthur McIvor, was essentially an extended contribution to the ongoing Red Clydeside debate, and contained original chapters by the Workshop team and some individual members of the Society.²² Following further research and Workshop seminars in 1994–95, they made their final, and most significant, effort as a collective, combining with individual colleagues and other historians to contribute a second substantial publication edited by William Kenefick and Arthur McIvor.²³

Conclusion

Apart from the singular activities of Glasgow Labour History Workshop, on an annual basis from the late 1980s, leading members of SLHS have endeavoured to produce a journal and organize two half-day conferences as the staple service to members and the interested public. The editorial collective, led by Eleanor Gordon from 1988 until 1993, by Arthur McIvor between 1994 and 1998, and by the author of this article between

²⁰ Notice of 'Proposed London and Southern England Branch', *Scottish Labour History Journal*, 24 (1989), 3.

²¹ Glasgow Labour History Workshop, *The Singer Strike, Clydebank, 1911* (Glasgow: Glasgow Labour History Workshop, 1989).

²² *Militant Workers: Labour and Class Conflict on the Clyde 1900–1950: Essays in Honour of Harry McShane, 1891–1988*, ed. by Robert Duncan and Arthur McIvor (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1992).

²³ *Roots of Red Clydeside 1910–1914? Labour Unrest and Industrial Relations in West Scotland*, ed. by William Kenefick and Arthur McIvor (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1996).

1999 and 2008, has continued to develop the thematic content of our refereed journal as, for example, inclusion of more articles on women workers and activists, the world of work and accompanying health issues, and oral history documentation. During my period of custody, extended opportunities for young historians to publish the results of their work have been encouraged, without compromising academic standards, and perhaps adding to the appeal of the journal.

Into the new century, despite the continuing viability of the journal, there has, nevertheless, been a discernible decline in the practice of labour history, in consistent support for conferences, and in active membership of SLHS. At a well-attended April 2000 conference, a panel of prominent labour historians discussed whether there was a future for labour history, particularly in Scotland.²⁴ Despite some critical reservations, they delivered a positive response. Alan Campbell and John Foster confidently affirmed the future of mainstream labour history in Scotland, based on the primacy of the class struggle, past and present; although Willie Thompson was more sceptical about its prospects, warning that it may become subordinate to social history, and could find itself recording the history of a dead institution if the labour movement entered terminal decline. Eleanor Gordon appealed for greater recognition of the role of gender in class formation and the influence of women in the making of the Scottish working class. All speakers addressed the influence of postmodernist challenges to the subject, and this debate was followed up in subsequent issues of *Scottish Labour History*.²⁵ The 2000 conference and the issues arising from it represented an important juncture, akin to the stock-taking/future directions conference in 1986, as it has informed the practice of SLHS over the last ten years, especially regarding journal content and conference options. In short, the postmodernist challenge — a rather mute one in Scotland — has been deflected and absorbed, and has not altered the fundamental perspectives and practice of SLHS.

However, like so many voluntary organizations, the Society is displaying an ageing individual member profile, and older members are in danger of dying off faster than efforts to renew it with vital sources of activism and commitment. From the late 1980s until around 2005, allowing for temporary fluctuations, the SLHS sustained a peak total of 300 members, of which nearly 250 were individual members. In 2008–09 numbers had dropped to nearly 170 individual members, although subscribing organizations, including labour movement bodies and libraries, and several overseas institutions, held up the level of corporate support at around 50 members. Despite the onset of a period of hard labour, the SLHS is not stalked by disillusion or demoralization. But there is still a lot of work to be done if we are to ensure its viability and continuing mission.

²⁴ Conference Report, “‘Is There a Future for the Past?’: Trade Unions, Women, Labour and Labour History in the New Millennium”, *Scottish Labour History*, 35 (2000), 3–7.

²⁵ See Callum Brown, ‘A Brief Defence of Postmodernism’, *Scottish Labour History*, 36 (2001), 3–5; Willie Thompson, ‘Postmodernism: A Brief Response to Callum Brown’, *Scottish Labour History*, 37 (2002), 5–7.

