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# Mrs Ann Errington of Sacriston: the political biography of a Durham miner's wife between the wars

John Tomaney 

Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

The place of women in the history of UK coalfield communities remains under-researched. This paper addresses this lacuna through an examination of the life of County Durham miner's wife, Annie Errington, who emerged as an important political leader in her community in the interwar period. Situating her life story in the context of her community, characterised by strong cooperative and socialist values, the paper assembles her political biography from fragmented sources. It identifies her key role in local government, her visit to Soviet Russia in 1926 and as a leader of a mass movement of miners' wives in interwar Britain. While avowedly a miner's wife, Annie Errington emerges as an important political leader, albeit her role was limited by prevailing orthodoxies about gender relations, some of which she endorsed herself. The paper contributes to the feminist historiography of mining communities, which has largely overlooked—and at times denied—the extent of political activism of women in this period.

## KEYWORDS

Coalmining communities;  
County Durham; feminist  
historiography

## Introduction

'All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded', Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*<sup>1</sup>

In 1926, in the midst of the Miners' Lockout, the consequential industrial action to occur in interwar Britain which lasted nine months causing immense hardship in the coalfields, a remarkable confrontation took place in north London. According to the *Daily Herald*:

A Tottenham cleric wrote to the local press telling of the great times miners are having in Chester-le-Street [County Durham]. Mrs. Errington, a miner's wife, and [Poor Law] Guardian of Chester-le-Street, appeared at Tottenham to confront the cleric. She gave him the real facts. He admitted himself vanquished and did the decent thing, handing over 5s, for the relief fund. He was satisfied that he had been misinformed[.]<sup>2</sup>

Who was Mrs Errington, why did she travel to London to berate an Anglican Rector for misrepresenting the miners' struggle and what is the wider significance of her story? This

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**CONTACT** John Tomaney  [j.tomaney@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:j.tomaney@ucl.ac.uk)  Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, Central House, 14 Upper Woburn Place, London WC1H 0NN, UK

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paper seeks to answer these questions. It has two analytical purposes. First, it seeks to assemble the political biography of a Durham miner's wife from the fragmented record and situate it within her milieu and times.<sup>3</sup> It tells the extraordinary story of an ordinary woman. There are few, if any political biographies of miners' wives, so this task has intrinsic value. Inspired by Virginia Woolf, the aim then is to record an obscure life. Second, I use the story of Annie Errington to contribute to the revision of the historiography of women's political activity in the coalfields. The aim here is to recover the political agency of the coalfield from its neglect by feminist historiography.

## Gender, place, coal

The place of women in the history of coalfield communities in the UK remains under-researched. The making of these communities involved highly localised but colossal struggles to secure political representation and social advances.<sup>4</sup> But what was the role of women in these political efforts? Despite the attention given to women's activism in the 1984/5 miners' strike<sup>5</sup>, the longer story of women's political activity remains a comparatively neglected aspect of coalfield history.<sup>6</sup> I address these absences by piecing together, from a range of fragmented sources, the lineaments of a political biography of one woman, Mrs. Ann ('Annie') Errington, a Durham miner's wife who, in the period between the First and Second World Wars, emerged as a political leader of a mass movement of miners' wives in County Durham. Annie's politics were shaped by her community which was the small and seemingly unremarkable mining village of Sacriston. Annie Errington—and women like her—played a critical role in advancing social demands and consolidating the hegemony of the Labour Party in County Durham during this period, yet her story is untold. In many ways an ordinary woman, she led an extraordinary life which is now largely forgotten, even in the village in which she remained rooted throughout her life. The first aim, then, is to narrate Annie Errington's political life from the available sources but setting that life in its social context.<sup>7</sup> Despite advances in feminist scholarship, there remains the need to reveal the 'hidden histories' of working-class women.<sup>8</sup>

A secondary concern of this paper is to consider afresh how working-class women are represented in histories of the coalfields. While the pioneering work of Jill Liddington, Jill Norris and others drew attention to the experience of working-class women, notably in the struggle for suffrage in Lancashire<sup>9</sup>, there remains a dearth of studies about the political activities of women in the coalfields. Existing accounts are partial and, at times, misleading. In 1984, Linda McDowell and Doreen Massey reckoned that 'danger and drudgery; male solidarity and female oppression' summed up life in the colliery villages of County Durham. Isolated mono-industrial mining communities in which, after 1842, women were excluded by legislation from employment in mines, confined women's work to the domestic sphere ensuring 'their exclusion from the local political and social life'. Besides, 'Durham miners, themselves oppressed at work, were often tyrants in their own home, dominating their wives in an often oppressive and bullying fashion'.<sup>10</sup> The idea of the miner's home as a tyranny is developed by Beatrix Campbell:

As in the Army and the Stock Exchange, men's companionship did not produce social cohesion; it fostered power and privilege for men within their own class and community ... No day matched Sunday for desolation. Up with the children, the woman kept them quiet while

the man had his lie-in, made the dinner while he sank a skinful at the pub, kept the kids quiet while he slept it off, made the tea, put the kids to bed while he ended the day down the club ... Miners' clubs along the north-east coast were the cathedrals of their communities, the space where men had their pleasure and their politics. Their homes, however, remained some of the worst in Britain[.]<sup>11</sup>

In *Wigan Pier Revisted*, Campbell argues that mining communities excluded women's political activity, 'A woman in the Northeast involved in a campaign to improve colliery houses arrived at lodge meeting with material on houses for the members. "They told me "we've never let a woman on before and we're not going to now" and they didn't".<sup>12</sup>

There is unchallengeable truth in this interpretation of the life of women in mining communities. Social conditions in the villages were dire.<sup>13</sup> There were scarcely any opportunities for women in mining villages to work outside the home. Durham was the 'most married county' in England: women married early, and rates of fertility were exceptionally high until the middle of the twentieth century. Maternal and infant mortality rates in County Durham were among the highest in the country. Life-threatening diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery, diphtheria, smallpox, cholera, and enteric fever, were endemic in mining villages. The mortality and morbidity rates of women in the Durham and Northumberland coalfields were higher than that of men, despite the danger of mining work. County Durham had the most overcrowded housing in England and Wales. The domestic work of women was exceptionally onerous. A miner's wife was required to feed and bathe him and wash his dirty pit clothes with only pots, pans and open hearth or range. If she had sons working on different shifts, the work of a miner's wife was relentless. Tommy Turnbull, a Durham miner, gives a moving account the death of his beloved mother from what can only be described as overwork.<sup>14</sup> Male violence towards women was a feature of mining communities.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, however, McDowell Massey and Campbell, in several ways, offer a partial and thin account of life of miners' wives that pays surprisingly little attention to the actual lives of real women. A fuller account would acknowledge the way women were involved centrally in defining their own domesticity, were deeply committed to keeping a spotless house, maintaining 'well-turned out' children and producing nourishing meals. Women themselves rigorously policed this gendered world by holding to account others who failed to meet accepted standards of domestic work.<sup>16</sup> This a key theme of Winifred Crawley's semi-autobiographical novel, *Gran at Coalgate*, set in a Durham mining village in 1925 in which women harshly judge their peers.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as well as oppressions, there were also apparently companionate marriages<sup>18</sup> between miners and their wives of the type experienced by Tommy and Allie Turnbull and Jack and Bella Lawson.<sup>19</sup>

Broader historiography, moreover, tends overlook the emergence of women's political activity in the coalfield. For instance, Collette's account of the Women's Labour League in the period before the First World War, displays a lack of curiosity about its geography, even if her data suggest its importance. Collette shows, for instance, that branches of the League were established disproportionately in North East England. Twenty branches were formed in the region, according to Collette's data, second only to more populous Lancashire and London. Branches were established across the Durham coalfield including at Birtley, Bishop Auckland, Boldon Colliery, Shildon and South Shields. The League's indefatigable organiser in the North East during this period was Lisbeth

Simm, a miner's daughter from Cramlington.<sup>20</sup> Collette offers no explanation for this heightened level of regional activity. Indeed, rather perplexingly in light of her data, she implies women in the coalfield communities were resistant to political involvement.<sup>21</sup>

In his 'Homage to Tom Maguire', E.P. Thompson warns of the dangers of the cursory overview of provincial life designed to bolster ideological and conceptual preconceptions, in which 'provincial leaders are commonly denied full historical citizenship' and capacity for initiative, or are presented as cyphers of larger, 'national' forces. Thompson exemplifies his point by excavating the story of Tom Maguire (1865–1895), radical, trade unionist and poet who lived in Leeds, thanklessly promoting the cause of socialism before successfully organising a strike of gas workers in 1890 and dying at the tragically young age of 30. From that conflict, under the guidance of Maguire and others, emerged the Independent Labour Party (ILP) to represent working-class interests in Leeds which, in turn, contributed to the reordering of national politics. Thompson attributes Maguire's achievements to his embeddedness in the distinctive industrial culture of West Yorkshire and his ability to capture political opportunities to advance the cause of labour. Emerging labour politics at that time was expressed in many distinctive local struggles that resist broad generalisation and require close investigation.<sup>22</sup> Thompson's injunction, made more than half a century ago, not to ignore the historical richness of provincial life, remains valid, but his magnum opus, *The Making of the English Working Class*, in seeking to 'to rescue the poor stockinger, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity'<sup>23</sup>, scarcely mentions the lives of women.

Although still a nascent field, a reformulated feminist history of the coalfields is taking shape. For instance, the work of Valerie Gordon Hall illuminates the case of southeast Northumberland, Gordon Hall providing a convincing account of women's political activities in a mining community. She acknowledges—and documents—the highly gendered segregation of life in mining villages and the oppressive experiences of women and notes also that only a minority of women were actively involved in politics, which remained dominated by men. But she charts the rapid politicisation and growth of activism among women in mining communities in the twentieth century, especially focused on the Labour Party, through which women began to win elected office in local government. This challenged, although never overturned, male control of party and governmental structures and both created and responded to emerging political opportunities. Importantly, these struggles produced material gains for women:

Labour women consistently fought for working-class women's interests, especially those of mining women. They shared the municipal goals of the party: building council houses, paving the streets, and cleaning up the polluted atmosphere. Like men, they protested against the means test for unemployment benefits, instituted in 1931. Gender shaped their class experiences, however, and they also struggled to right grievances specific to working-class women, especially women in mining communities: poorer than average health, greater than average fertility, and infant mortality[.]<sup>24</sup>

Women in coalfield communities built local, regional and national and even international networks to support their action in the labour and cooperative movements, invested heavily in training and transformed their domestic skills into political organising. In County Durham, Annie Errington played a critical role in these advances.

## The world of Annie Errington

Ann Nicholson was born in Sacriston, County Durham in 1882, the daughter of a miner and his wife. She married William ('Bill') Errington, a miner at Sacriston Colliery, in 1903. Sacriston, at that time, was a rapidly growing village. Although mining had taken place on a small scale in the district for generations, the sinking a shaft 200 m below ground in 1839, to access the deeper and richer seams, transformed this corner of County Durham, creating a new industrial society. New pits now were being sunk across the coalfield, taking advantage of technological breakthroughs that allowed mining at greater depth, to serve expanding markets in industrial Britain and across the Empire and beyond. By 1850, Sacriston was a small village, comprising a handful of terraced cottages hastily erected by the coal company to accommodate its new workforce. Migrants flocked to County Durham to take advantage of the new employment opportunities in the mines. By the interwar period, 900 men were employed at Sacriston colliery, and the village had grown to accommodate them and their families. Annie, then, was born into the second generation of a world that was being thrown together rapidly—the village population increased fivefold in two generations—and was at the leading edge of global capitalism.<sup>25</sup>

Conditions in both the mine and the village were harsh when Annie was born. Although Sacriston largely avoided the major underground disasters that nearby villages experienced, the work of Annie's father and other miners was difficult, dirty, dangerous, and periodically deadly. Moreover, while Victorian capitalism was booming, coal market conditions fluctuated dramatically, and employers typically responded to price falls by demanding pay reductions and longer hours from their workers. Miners began a struggle to organise in order to improve conditions, culminating in the formation of the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) in 1869. The turn of the twentieth century was punctuated by strikes—locally and nationally—often brutally crushed by the coal owners. As a young woman, Annie lived through major strikes in 1892, 1912 and 1921 which caused immense hardship. The early leadership of the DMA initially aligned itself politically with William Gladstone's Liberal Party and pursued a distinctive politics of moderation and conciliation with the owners through most of this period. Local branches of the union ('Lodges') often found themselves in conflict with their leaders but became increasingly important in the workplace where strong traditions of solidarity developed, and in village life where the Lodge became involved in the battle to improve social conditions. Lodge banners, paraded most regularly at the annual Durham Miners' Gala, were treated with reverence, and became symbols of village identity.<sup>26</sup> Attendance at the Gala was a ritual for Annie Errington.

Sacriston, like other coalfield villages, lacked basic infrastructure and services at the time of Annie's birth. Overcrowded housing was the norm. Water and sanitation provision comprised, at best, standpipes and dry closets, while roads were unpaved and street lighting non-existent. Medical provision was rudimentary. But the migrant community that made up Sacriston busied itself from the beginning in creating new social infrastructure.<sup>27</sup> The earliest form of this came in the shape of religious institutions and buildings. By 1890, as attested by business directories, villagers had built an Anglican Church, a Catholic Church—to accommodate Irish migrants—Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist chapels. Later, other Methodist sects built chapels, along with Plymouth

Brethren, and the Salvation Army opened a citadel in the village. These were not simply places of Christian worship but were also gathering places and centres for social action. The Anglicans and Catholics also built schools, while a Sunday School tradition developed among the Methodists. Primitive Methodists were leaders in the establishment of the DMA and, while the village experienced sectarian conflict in the Victorian era which lingered into the next century, the Lodge was a place where men in the community came together in common cause.<sup>28</sup> This was a world where religion and politics mixed freely. Annie's family was Wesleyan Methodist and Christian values shaped her life: she retained a lifelong membership of the Christian Auxiliary Movement.<sup>29</sup>

In this milieu, local traditions of cooperation and mutualism emerged. Two clear examples are provided by the village Co-op (or 'Store', as it was universally known) and the Durham Aged Miners' Workers Homes Association. In 1897, the Annfield Plain Industrial Co-operative Society Ltd. opened a branch in Sacriston,<sup>30</sup> when Annie was fifteen years old. The Society was one of several that had been formed across the county during last quarter of the nineteenth century to break the hold of mining companies over local retail provision and improve the quality of goods and services available in villages. While cooperative societies existed throughout Britain, County Durham had the highest membership rate of cooperative societies in the country by 1940—twice the rate of southeast England.<sup>31</sup> The Society's profit—or 'surplus', as it was known—was shared among the members in the form of a 'Dividend'. The opening of the Sacriston branch of the Co-op was a major event and contemporary reports lauded its opulence.<sup>32</sup> Men dominated the early years of cooperatives in County Durham. The moving force behind the establishment of the Annfield Plain Industrial Co-operative Society Ltd was a colliery mechanic, John Wilkinson Taylor, who became a leading figure in the ILP. But, reflecting the importance of the co-op in women's lives, women began to assert their position in its structures. In 1883 the Co-operative Women's Guild was established and became a focus for many women's lives.<sup>33</sup> Annie Errington became an active member of the Guild, although her activity was focused on the Daisy Hill branch of the Chester-le-Street Co-operative Society, which was founded in 1875, and which she chaired in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>34</sup>

The Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association (DAMHA) grew from the vision of Joseph Hopper, a miner and Primitive Methodist preacher, to meet the needs of miners and their families who otherwise would be evicted from tied colliery homes when they retired. A small weekly levy voluntarily donated from miners' wages, plus donations of land and materials from mine owners and others, allowed houses to be constructed and let free of charge. Similar levies were used to support the provision of a range of social infrastructure in the villages. Despite the social, industrial and political upheavals of the time, the 1920s saw an expansion of house building by the Association in County Durham. The first aged miners' homes in Sacriston were opened in the midst of the 1926 Miners' Lockout and the opening was attended by the colliery management as well as union officials.<sup>35</sup> The DAMHA developed a structure of district committees which oversaw the developments in the villages and upon which the DMA Lodges were represented. Annie Errington's husband, Bill, was a member of the Sacriston District Committee.<sup>36</sup> By 1923 over 1600 people were housed by DAMHA and each year between 50 and 100 new homes were being built. The DAMHA was viewed as a central and prefigurative element of the emerging local tradition of cooperation.

The principle political development that occurred alongside the advance of co-operation was the emergence of the ILP in Durham as the vehicle to advance working-class interests. Branches were formed across the County in the first decade of the twentieth century and long campaign began to switch the allegiance of the DMA from the Liberals to Labour.<sup>37</sup> A key moment in this struggle occurred in 1906, when Annie was 24 years old and shortly to become a mother. In the General Election of that year, John Wilkinson Taylor, backed by the DMA, defeated both the Liberal and Conservative candidate, was elected as Labour MP for the Chester-le-Street constituency, of which Sacriston was part, becoming one of the first Labour MPs in the House of Commons. The Labour Party has represented the constituency uninterrupted, in its various guises, since then. At a local scale, the Labour Party also began to win representation on Parish and District Councils and as Poor Law Guardians. In 1919, Labour won control of Durham County Council. After briefly losing its majority, Labour recaptured the County Council in 1923 and remained in control until 2021. The Labour Party from 1906 onwards provided the connective tissue that linked political, industrial and social action.

Women's political activity in County Durham was significant during this period.<sup>38</sup> An active suffragist movement, involving miners' wives was growing rapidly in County Durham before the First World War. In July 1913, Mrs Amy Walker Black, a miner's wife, addressed the Alma Lodge of the Durham Miner's Association—at the Bird Inn, West Pelton, a short distance from Sacriston—in support of women's suffrage. Afterwards the meeting, chaired by the then County Councillor and later MP for Chester-le-Street, Jack Lawson, passed a resolution in support of votes for women.<sup>39</sup> The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) mounted a concerted push to win the support of the Durham miners during the summer of 1913. A Sacriston branch of the NUWSS—with Miss M.E.M. Gunn as secretary—existed in the years before the First World War.<sup>40</sup> Dr Ethel Williams, Newcastle's first female General Practitioner, and chair of the North Eastern Federation of the NUWSS, addressed an open-air meeting in Sacriston on 17th June, which it seems highly likely Annie Errington would have attended.<sup>41</sup> Miss Sheard of the NUWSS alone addressed miners in Handen Hold, Edmondsley, Pelton Fell, Perkinsville and Gateshead during July.<sup>42</sup> Handen Hold Lodge passed a resolution in support of women's suffrage that month.<sup>43</sup> When W.P. Richardson, the Durham miners' leader, was selected as the Labour parliamentary candidate in nearby Houghton-le-Spring, *Common Cause*, the newspaper of the NUWSS, described him as 'a good Suffragist'.<sup>44</sup> By this time there were branches of the NUWSS across Durham.<sup>45</sup> This activity culminated at the Durham Miners' Gala of 1914 when Margaret Robertson and Muriel Matters were given a platform to address the crowds on behalf of NUWSS and 'received an enthusiastic reception' and the ILP newspaper, *Labour Leader*, opined, 'The miners of Durham realise the demand for Woman Suffrage is an integral part of the Labour programme and evidently determined to place it in the forefront'.<sup>46</sup> A space was being created for women's political action—space which Annie Errington was about to occupy.

### Annie Errington—a political biography

Annie Errington was 38 years old before she had the right to vote and stand for election to public office. In the first years of twentieth century, she settled into married life and

motherhood. In 1907 she wrote to a local newspaper with tips on how to remove hot water marks from a mahogany table.<sup>47</sup> In 1912, a Mrs W. Errington of Sacriston won a prize for her household recipes.<sup>48</sup> To begin with, it was Annie's husband who won office. Bill Errington was elected to the key role of Treasurer in the Sacriston Lodge of the DMA in 1908, a position he held for 20 years.<sup>49</sup> In 1922, Bill was elected to Witton Gilbert Parish Council, which at that time governed Sacriston.<sup>50</sup> Although the couple would go on to form an impressive political partnership, Annie's public career began to eclipse that of her husband. During the 1920s, the *Durham Chronicle* published profiles of leading Lodge officials, attesting their status as political leaders in the county. Among those profiled was Bill Errington, then deputy overman at Sacriston colliery. The paper noted he was Treasurer of Sacriston Lodge, a trustee of Sacriston Memorial Hall, a member of DAMHA District Committee, parish councillor, and Treasurer of the Wesleyan PSA Committee. It mentioned his military service in the South African War and the 1914–1918 War, from which he was demobbed as a Colour Sergeant. But this profile was unique because it also mentioned the activities of his wife: 'Mrs Errington was elected to Chester-le-Street Rural District Council and is a governor of Chester-le-Street Secondary School. She has represented Durham Miners' Wives and Children Funds in London and Russia'.<sup>51</sup>

The political context after 1918, which framed Annie's public life, was shaped by two processes. First, was the enduring crisis in the coal industry that culminated in the General Strike and Miners' Lockout of 1926. Second, in Durham at that time, Labour was consolidating its control of local government and parliamentary representation. In a by-election in 1919, Jack Lawson replaced the ailing J.W. Taylor as MP for Chester-le-Street, a post he held until 1949. The Party's control of the County Council meant that the Durham coalfield was being transformed into a heartland of the Labour Party. It was in this context that Annie Errington emerged as a leader of Labour's long march through the civic and political institutions of the County. Her recorded activity appears boundless, her energy irrepressible and her courage indefatigable.

Annie was elected to Chester-le-Street Rural District Council (RDC) in 1925. In England and Wales, RDCs were created by the Local Government Act 1894 (along with urban districts), replacing the earlier system of sanitary districts, which were responsible for managing basic water and sanitation. RDCs later acquired broader responsibilities for local land-use planning and the provision of basic infrastructure and, increasingly the provision of council housing.<sup>52</sup> While Durham had the poorest housing conditions in England, District Councils in the county in the interwar period, using new legislation, built council houses at twice the national rate.<sup>53</sup> Annie served on the finance and housing committees of the council.<sup>54</sup> Parish councils dealt with very local matters such as footpaths and street lighting, which held high importance in places which lacked them. In 1934 Annie was elected to Witton Gilbert Parish Council, joining her husband Bill.<sup>55</sup> Two years later she was elected the first woman chairman of the council.<sup>56</sup> Until 1930, RDCs also delegated councillors to act as Poor Law Guardians for the unions of which they formed part. Local government comprised a complex architecture of joint boards and committees in various fields of social policy. Annie, increasingly, came to occupy key positions in this world. Notably, in 1936, she became the first woman to chair the Chester-le-Street Joint Hospital Board and was also appointed a governor of the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle.<sup>57</sup>

By the middle of the 1920s, Annie was embroiled in major political controversies which were connected to the General Strike and Miners' Lockout of 1926 that garnered national attention and increased her local profile. The long prelude to this dispute culminated in the coal owners' attempts to enforce wage reductions and lengthen the working day of the mining workforce. The Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) called on the support of the Trades Union Congress which organised a General Strike that lasted nine days in May. After the collapse of the General Strike, the employers locked out the miners until they accepted the terms that been imposed upon them. The mining dispute lasted until November before the miners were forced back to work on the employers' terms. The strike was strongly supported in Durham but had begun to fracture by the end of October with men at some pits defying their union and drifting back to work. At Sacriston, seemingly, the Lodge held on to the bitter end, returning to work in early December.<sup>58</sup> Women took an active role in the Lockout in support of their communities. Bella Jolley, a miner's wife whose husband had survived the West Stanley pit disaster of 1909, recounted her trips to Redhills, the Miners' Hall in Durham, to obtain aid that she brought back to her village. Years later she said, 'If the Labour movement has to go down in history one of its finest achievements is how the women stood by their men in 1926 and I really believe that'.<sup>59</sup> Annie Errington's played a prominent role in the politics of this period, exemplified in three episodes discussed below.

### **Annie Errington and the Chester-le-Street Poor Law Guardians**

The Lockout caused severe hardship in mining communities. Following the Local Government Act 1894, the Chester-le-Street Board of Poor Law Guardians comprised representatives appointed from rural district councils and Guardians elected directly in urban areas and covered twenty parishes, including Sacriston, with a combined population of 86,000. It comprised 59 members, of whom 39 were miners' officials, miners, or miners' wives.<sup>60</sup> As a Rural District Councillor, Annie was a *de facto* member of the Chester-le-Street Board of Guardians. The Guardians were responsible, among other things, for the provision of 'outdoor relief'—welfare payments—to the qualified poor. Relief was funded through a local rate on property owners. By the beginning of 1926, Board funds in many coalfield areas were running low as a result recurring lay-offs in the mining industry. Already in February, the Chester-le-Street Board approached the Ministry of Health for a loan to help it meet its obligations.<sup>61</sup> With the onset of the Miners' Lockout in May, the demand for outdoor relief grew and provided the context for a conflict between the Chester-le-Street Guardians and the Conservative government and the minister responsible, Neville Chamberlain, which attracted intense national attention.

Locally, on the one hand, the Guardians were under pressure from ratepayers who objected to rises in rates to support outdoor relief. Two Sacriston men, shopkeepers John Nesbitt of Front Street and R Whelan of Plawsworth Road—'more or less the leading lights of the village'—were summoned for refusing to pay what they claimed were excessive rates<sup>62</sup>, while others accused the Guardians of being 'mad men' for giving over-generous relief to miners and their families. The Chairman of the Guardians, W.J. Johnson, an Usworth miner, rejected the claim they were squandering money: 'They were moved with sympathy for their downtrodden fellows, and their first business was to

see that the women and children came to no harm. That was what they had done, for the men received nothing'. Detractors were attempting 'to stop women and children from getting bread'.<sup>63</sup> In August, a newly formed Chester-le-Street Ratepayers Association called for the Guardians to be surcharged and condemned local traders who refused to join their organisation for fear of ostracisation by their customers who were overwhelmingly miners' wives.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, the local branch of the Communist-led National Unemployed Workers' Movement, organised a series of meetings and demonstrations against Labour Guardians for failing to provide adequate levels of relief to miners' families and out-of-work men.<sup>65</sup> In a traditionally moderate coalfield, there is evidence of growing radicalisation among at least some miners during 1926: a 'well-attended' Communist meeting was held in Sacriston in August.<sup>66</sup>

The Guardians continued to make payments that Ministry of Health deemed unlawful because, under the terms of the Poor Law Act, it was forbidden to grant relief to men engaged in an industrial dispute, no matter the deprivation. The precise point of conflict concerned the decision of the Guardians to make outdoor relief payments to 4000 single miners. Despite being locked out by the employers, single men were deemed available for work and not entitled to any support. By August, the Ministry of Health was threatening to take over the Chester-le-Street Board of Guardians.<sup>67</sup> But this threat served only to inflame the situation. Later that month, W.J. Johnson stated the intention of the Guardians to 'stand by our people'. He continued, 'The Minister tells us we shall be surcharged and be forced to heel, but even the threat of gaol will not intimidate us. Knowing the justice of our cause, we shall stand by whatever happens, and say, Damn the Consequences'. The Guardians suspended the Relieving Officers—the appointed officials who administered the Poor Law—for refusing instructions to make payments to single miners. As Johnson addressed his fellow Guardians, 5000 miners gathered, some carrying 'Communist flags'.<sup>68</sup>

In early September, the Ministry rejected a request from the Guardians for a loan to meet its planned payments. The Guardians had refused to guarantee that they would deny payments to 'any miner in all circumstances unless each applicant was so reduced by privation as to be physically incapable of work'. Norman Batterbury, the ministry inspector arrived at the meeting but was chased from the building and the now suspended Guardians sang 'Lead, Kindly Light' and 'The Red Flag'. The Ministry appointed its own commissioners in the form of 'three Newcastle gentlemen', namely Charles Shortt, KC, Vice-Admiral William Slayter and John Wise, JP.<sup>69</sup> Their first action was to cut relief rates, but their meetings were accompanied by mass protests and required police protection. When, in early September, the Guardians were summoned before the District Auditor to account for their expenditure, an estimated 20,000 miners and their families gathered in their support: 'Women wheeling perambulators and others carrying mere infants in their arms were there; and ordinary traffic had necessarily to be suspended for a while'.<sup>70</sup> In October, 8000 women, organised by the Labour Federation of Women's Sections, headed by bands and banners rushed the gates of the Chester-le-Street Union officers, which were protected by the police.<sup>71</sup> Women predominated amongst the demonstrators, who travelled from Pelton Fell, West Pelton, Ouston, Sacriston, Witton Gilbert, Fatfield and Grange Villa. They carried a banner with the inscription —'We want our Guardians back', and another decorated with ivy read: 'Just like ivy we will cling to you'.<sup>72</sup>

The legal ramifications of the dispute rumbled on. At this time, the Guardians faced relentless Conservative and national media attacks. The District Auditor ruled that the Guardians had exceeded their authority in making payments to single miners and surcharged them £480.15s.<sup>73</sup> In November, the Guardians were arraigned before Magistrates and distress warrants were issued against them in lieu of the surcharge that had been imposed on the Guardians.<sup>74</sup> Now, the Guardians confronted the prospect of distraint and bailiffs arriving at their homes to seize goods, although a legal appeal was launched immediately. The appeal was finally rejected in April 1927, and Annie Errington, alongside the other Guardians, were surcharged. Speaking for the Guardians, Ben Oliver stated, 'I would rather go to gaol than pay a penny of this money and I think the majority of the Guardians will take the same view as myself'.<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, the DMA stepped into pay the money out of unions funds, saving the Guardians from prison. The government appointed commissioners published a report which accused the Guardians of criminal conspiracy to abuse the Poor Law.<sup>76</sup> This raised the possibility that Annie and the other Guardians would face criminal charges and, again, the possibility of jail. The Ministry of Health passed the report to the Director of Public Prosecutions with a view to laying charges. A rowdy debate on the report in the House of Commons saw Chamberlain booed and hissed by Labour MPs, while Jack Lawson condemned the Report as biased and called for a Public Inquiry.<sup>77</sup> Ultimately no criminal charges were laid against the Guardians and the threat of prison was removed.<sup>78</sup>

### **Annie Errington in the Soviet Union**

Despite her leading role in the Guardians, while the struggle in Chester-le-Street was reaching its crescendo in September and October, Annie Errington was absent. In 1926, the Soviet trade unions donated a large sum the British miners' families' relief fund. In August, the Soviet unions invited a delegation from the MFGB to visit the country, nominally to collect the funds, but also to counter claims made in the British press that the Soviet miners had been compelled by the government to make donations in support of their striking British counterparts.<sup>79</sup> Annie Cook, wife of MFGB leader A.J. Cook, was included in the delegation and she asked for other miners' wives to accompany her. Marion Phillips, the Labour Party's Chief Woman Officer, selected the women to join the party. As a leading figure in Durham, Annie Errington was included as the representative of the coalfield and left for Russia. Phillips later argued, 'This was the first occasion on which a delegation of working-class housewives had made an official visit of this sort'.<sup>80</sup>

The visit attracted national press attention which, perhaps inevitably, generally portrayed the delegation as Soviet dupes. One of miners' wives, Mrs Green of Abertillery, wrote from Russia to *The Labour Woman*, to report on the warm welcome they had received which has 'emphatically given the lie to the statement in the British Press that the Russian workers are coerced into making this collection. It is entirely voluntary: they do not need to pay unless they so desire'. *The Labour Woman* reported at length on the visit in its issue of November 1926. The miners' wives lauded the creches and gymnasiums which were available in the towns they visited, although they acknowledged they had only visited industrial areas not peasant villages and discussed the problem of illiteracy they witnessed. A later report described how they had witnessed 'the complete

emancipation of women' and how in the workplace no woman was penalised at marriage and women received extra allowances for childcare. The party acknowledged this meant little in Azerbaijan where they saw women were veiled: 'They never did anything outside of their own homes, took no part in social or public life, could not read or write and were virtually prisoners'.<sup>81</sup> In the Donbass, however, the women argued, 'mineworkers have every reason to be proud of their achievements of the past few years, and while they realise that they have not yet reached their ideals they are content because they know the future is theirs'. The British miners' wives were careful to deny they were Communists but argued Soviet and British workers were struggling for the same end. Nevertheless, the paper published a picture of the women wearing red kerchiefs, 'with Mrs Errington looking a real *bona fide* revolutionary!'<sup>82</sup> During this period Annie kept in contact with her family via postcards.<sup>83</sup> Annie was presented with a samovar as a souvenir. Upon her return, she said, 'It's a nice souvenir but we shall all be glad to get back to our own kettles and teapots. We are tired of coloured water with slices of lemon. The Russians cannot make tea'.<sup>84</sup>

On her return from Russia, the *Durham Chronicle* reported in detail on Annie's visit ('Sacrison Lady's Experience in Russia'). It described how the party travelled to Russia via Holland, Germany and the Baltic states and how, through interpreters, she had addressed thousands of Russian workers and Red Army soldiers. Their seven-week itinerary had taken them from Leningrad, through Tula and Rostov, across the Caucasus into the Baku oilfields. Annie's testimony is worth recording in full, not least because we can listen to her voice directly:

It has been a great experience and one which I will never forget. When we went away we were told that we would only be allowed to see what the Soviet officials wished us to see. That was not correct; on arrival we planned our own route and were encouraged to visit any place we desired. I wish the conditions in England were as favourable as those in Russia and that we had the same prospects as the Soviet workers. For instance, their miners receive a free house, light, coal and medical services, they are provided with free hospitals and sanitoriums, and their working clothes, boots and tools are also gratis. Each year the miner received a month's holiday with pay, and at the end of the present working term, he is to get a rise of ten per cent in wages. They work an eight hour day in the mines – one of which I descended – and the standard of living appears to be higher than in England. Food is very good and cheap, although clothing is extremely dear. Everywhere we went, we were welcomed heartily and at most places the workers only anxiety appeared to be whether they were giving enough [to the British miners]. It was evident from the contented faces of those people that they were happy. And in town, though our interpreter, I read out an extract from a London newspaper stating that the Russian strike levy was compulsory – it was met with roars of laughter. At these meetings people used to come from places over 40 miles distant to hear us, and on one occasion I addressed 5,000 soldiers of the Red Army. We were interviewed, photographed and even sketched and the newspapers greeted our arrival with huge headlines and often a message of greeting in English. Bands and banners also contributed to our welcome but one custom became rather monotonous – at the conclusion to every speech, no matter how brief, the instrumentalists always made it a point to play the *Internationale* ... The Co-operative movement in Russia was an absolute eye-opener to us. It is so strong that private shops are allowed to remain open all night because they are being gradually crushed out of existence through lack of trade. We visited both the cooperative and private markets, and found the former to be much superior.<sup>85</sup>

Press opprobrium was heaped upon the miners' wives long after the visit was over. Local Conservatives were infuriated by Annie's participation in the delegation to Russia, the favourable account of it she gave and the sympathetic hearing she received on her return. The strongly anti-Labour *Newcastle Journal* reported enthusiastically on a meeting held at Durham Town Hall in March 1927, which was organised explicitly to attack Annie. According to the *Journal*, 'The gathering had been convened by the Durham Division Women's Unionist Association in reply to a statement made by Mrs Anne Errington, of Sacriston, representing the Durham County Federation of Labour Women in connexion with a delegation to Russia, and who since then has been describing her experiences'.<sup>86</sup> Commander Oliver Locker-Campson, MP for Handsworth, launched the attack with a cry to 'Clear out the Reds'. (Despite calls to 'clear out the Reds', the Durham coalfield had a very small Communist presence compared to South Wales or Scotland, so this denunciation lacked credibility.) A striking aspect of the event, which symbolised the personal risks Annie was taking, was the presence on the platform of Col. W.C. Blackett, Managing Director of the Sacriston and Charlaw Collieries, which employed Annie's husband Bill. The attempt to portray Annie, the teetotal Methodist wife of a veteran of the First World War, as a communist evidently failed, as she continued to be re-elected by the people of Sacriston to the various positions she held. When Annie was appointed the first woman chairman of the Chester-le-Street Joint Hospital Board in 1930, the *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*—probably unnecessarily—listed her roles as a Councillor, member of the Chester-le-Street and Houghton-le-Spring Guardians Committee, Treasurer of the Durham County Labour Women's Advisory Council, Secretary of the Chester-le-Street Federation of Labour Women's Sections and Chairman of Sacriston Labour Women's Sections. And, duly, it acknowledged her historic visit to Russia.<sup>87</sup>

### **Annie Errington and a mass movement of miners' wives**

Annie Errington presided over a May Day meeting, in 1939, in the Sacriston Lodge meeting rooms in the Memorial Hall. It was the occasion of the unveiling of a new banner for the Sacriston Labour Women's Section. Councillor J.E. Gilliland the agent of the Chester-le-Street Divisional Labour Party, and husband of Annie's close friend and compatriot, Ada, did the honours. Bill Etherington was also a speaker at the meeting bringing the fraternal greetings of the local Labour Party. Representatives of the various miners Lodges also offered their good wishes. The banner bore the slogan 'Liberty' and the intention was to parade it at the forthcoming Women's Gala in Durham.<sup>88</sup>

The rapid growth of Women's Sections was an important component of Labour's organisation during the interwar period. Annie Errington was a leading figure in this movement. A conference of 200 women at Redhills, the Durham Miners' Hall, agreed to form a Women's Advisory Council in May 1920 and a meeting later that year agreed a constitution for the new organisation. A provisional committee was established with Bella Lawson—wife of the newly elected MP for Chester-le-Street, Jack Lawson—as chair, and Ada Gilliland, as secretary. Although not listed as one of the founders of the Women's Advisory Council, Annie Errington was a member of the Executive Committee for most of the interwar period and, in 1945, was its Treasurer, by which time she was in her sixties. A Durham County Labour Women's Advisory Council was elected in 1923

and provided the framework for the development of Women's Sections across the county.<sup>89</sup> Many years later Margaret Gibb—who was appointed the Labour Party's woman organiser in 1930<sup>90</sup>—recounted its origins:

Had you come into the Miners' Hall, Red Hills, Durham City one early evening in February 1923 and made your way to the Board Room there you would have found a gathering some twenty women carefully noting suggestions being put to them by small remarkably alert woman, Lillian Fenn B.A., who was the first organiser for the Labour Party in the then North Eastern Region ... They were the first *elected* Advisory Council for the County, and were in very many cases miners' wives[.]<sup>91</sup>

Local Women's Sections proliferated and became a focus for women's political activities. Annie Errington was Chairman of the Sacriston section until, in 1933, she was elected its President.<sup>92</sup> A striking feature of its activities was the deployment of domestic skills in pursuit of political advances. The section held frequent fund-raising activities. A jumble sale held at Sacriston Workmen's Club in 1929 raised £12 for Durham County Hospital.<sup>93</sup> A Sale of Work was held in October 1930, was presided over by Annie Errington, and opened by Bella Lawson.<sup>94</sup> (Annie herself won second prize for needlework at the Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council event in Chester-le-Street Cooperative Hall in September 1937.<sup>95</sup>) The Chester-le-Street Federation of Women's Sections—which drew in the surrounding mining villages including Sacriston—met quarterly at the Cooperative Hall in Chester-le-Street. The scale of its activities was large. At the quarterly meeting in September 1938, 175 representatives from 16 sections attended.<sup>96</sup> Amongst its high-profile activities was organising the demonstrations in support of the Chester-le-Street Guardians in 1926.

The Advisory Council held bi-annual conferences, annual summer schools and an annual Women's Gala. It provided the framework for the development of local activities and trained a cadre of leaders. The biannual meetings were held around the coalfield. 230 women, representing 119 Women's Sections, attended the County Advisory Committee at the Miners' Hall in Easington in February 1926. Mrs Jolley of West Stanley addressed the meeting on 'Why Food is Dear', Mrs Carter of Chester-le-Street, spoke on 'Boys and Girls and their Education' and Mrs Thompson of Castletown, covered 'Mines and men'.<sup>97</sup> Nearly 100 sections were represented at Spring Conference of 1936 held in South Shields, where Mrs E Thompson of Castletown urged young women 'to acquire greater knowledge of local government affairs'.<sup>98</sup>

The first Women's Gala was held at Wharton Park in Durham City in 1923, preceded by a demonstration in which 5000 women and seventy green and white banners, accompanied by bands, paraded through the city. The Gala heard speeches from Sydney Webb, Dr Marion Phillips and Jack Lawson MP, among others. But on the fringes of the event was a Sale of Work, which raised £70 for the Advisory Committee.<sup>99</sup> When the Annual Gala was held in Sunderland in 1928, 10,000 women marched to Roker Park to listen to speeches. Annie Errington was among the speakers, along with Lilian Anderson Fenn and Thomasina Todd of Boldon. Other speakers included Arthur Henderson and Marion Phillips.<sup>100</sup> Annual Summer Schools began in 1924. Initially, six scholarships were offered. According to Lillian Anderson Fenn:

Over forty women sat for the examination on March 29th at the Durham Miners' Hall. The examination paper consisted of seven questions, five of which had to be answered, and these

were based on the *Daily Herald*, *The Labour Woman*, [Sydney Webb's] *Story of the Durham Miners*, and current topics. The examining body found it very difficult to judge between the papers and, in the end, twelve scholars were chosen., including a blind girl for whom an oral examination was held and 'who, in spite of her handicap, is a good worker in the village[.]'<sup>101</sup>

Attendance at summer schools, which were held at Kendal and Scarborough, grew during the 1920 and 1930s, providing unprecedented advanced educational opportunities for working-class women. But it was not all work. In 1935, over 1200 'County Durham Women Socialists' joined an outing to Harrogate, distributing 'Socialist propaganda' as they passed through towns on their journey. The party left Old Elvet in Durham in 50 buses. The organisers included Ada Gilliland and Annie Errington.<sup>102</sup>

The Women's Advisory Council provided a structure to allow women across the County, 'to take their place and assume responsibility in the Labour Party'.<sup>103</sup> Writing in 1945, Margaret Gibb, who was Labour's Women's Organiser in County Durham, wrote that,

For 25 years they have always stood loyally and devotedly by their menfolk in the industrial and political fields and in times of industrial dispute have never wavered. They worked for Local Government and for Parliament been before they were allowed to vote[.]<sup>104</sup>

Almost all the leading figures in the Advisory Council were miners' wives. Margaret Gibb described the DMA as 'magnificently helpful' to the Council; it offered the Miners' Hall in Durham City as the home for its major activities.<sup>105</sup> During the 1926 Lockout, the Council raised support for destitute families from elsewhere in the country through its Mothers and Babies Scheme. It was this effort that took Annie Errington to Tottenham to confront the vicar, described at the beginning of this paper. It was also her involvement in this activity that led to her inclusion in the Russian delegation in 1926. The Council provided a supportive network and training for the women now active in local government, albeit in a context where men still heavily predominated. A central task for the women's sections though was electoral campaigning. Margaret Gibb claimed,

The organised Labour Women played no small part in the big advance in parliamentary representation secured by Labour in 1922 when seats were won in various parts of the County; in 1929 when women became enfranchised on the same terms as men, they helped in the great sweep through out the County when we held all sets in the Advisory Council area[.]<sup>106</sup>

Significantly, it organised the women's sections in support of Dr Marion Phillips who was elected MP for Sunderland in 1929. In gratitude, Phillips presented the Council with a banner which was paraded at the annual Gala.

The context for the jubilee celebrations of the Council in 1945 was the recent election of a Labour government which appeared a vindication for generations of action. British society seemed on the brink of transformation and the miners' wives of Durham had played their part in the change to come. Gibb called on her troops to 'strive towards a Socialist Britain, a brighter, happier and a nobler Britain than we have yet known'.<sup>107</sup> But politics in County Durham remained an overwhelmingly male affair. In 1939, Thomasina Todd, secretary to the Durham Advisory Council, observed that, despite the progress of the previous 20 years, there were still only two women Labour County Councillors, 12 women on rural councils, 63 on parish councils, and 12 magistrates.<sup>108</sup>

And there were limits to the presence of women in this man's world, which were revealed at a Women's Advisory Council meeting in Easington in 1926:

Mrs E Lawther, of Chopwell advocated the admission of miners' wives as associate members of miners' union, claiming that by adoption of such a course women would be more familiar with mining questions and the man and women would be able to act with a loyal understanding in all disputes. The experiment had been tried with great success by the Chopwell Miners' Lodge. The suggestion was met with approval of the assembly, but no action was taken in the matter[.]<sup>109</sup>

## The achievement of Annie Errington and the limits of orthodox historiography

In this paper, I have presented a political biography of a Durham miner's wife and challenged aspects of the orthodox feminist historiography of women in the Durham coalfield. The aim is not to deny the gendered nature of life in the coalfield or the associated discriminations and oppressions that attended it. Rather, the purpose is to offer an account that recognises political agency of working-class women, with all its contradictions, that has hitherto been overlooked or denied. I have achieved this by purpose by assembling a political biography of Annie Errington focused on three key episodes—her role as a Poor Law Guardian, her visit to Russia in 1926 and her leadership of the Durham Labour Women's Sections, a mass movement of miners' wives.

Annie Errington did not fit the stereotype of meekly submissive miner's wife, trapped in her home, that is the conventional picture offered by feminist historiography. She was a political giant. A tidal wave of working-class women's activism swept through County Durham in the interwar period. The movement was capable of mobilising thousands of women for mass political action. At the same time, Annie Errington's political trajectory was contained with conventional expectations about the gender relations in the Durham coalfield which, in some measure, at least, she endorsed. In late 1944, when Jack Lawson sent the Annie and Bill Errington a copy of the newly published second edition of his memoir, *A Man's Life*<sup>110</sup>, she replied, indicating how moved she was by this gesture, wishing him and his 'good helpmate'—Lawson's wife Bella—a happy Christmas.<sup>111</sup> In 1950, when Lawson was appointed to the House of Lords, Annie wrote to congratulate him, noting that his success showed the importance of 'an ideal helpmate'—Bella Lawson—who was 'not afraid to work in the county for the movements who need help'.<sup>112</sup> From a conventional feminist perspective, this may demonstrate the 'internalised patriarchal values' but my purpose is to identify the social political advances which can be claimed by Annie Errington and her movement of miners' wives.<sup>113</sup> The absence of historical accounts of the politics of miners' wives might attributed to the male historical gaze but I have drawn attention to how feminist scholars have overlooked or denied working-class women's activism.

Annie Errington played a leading role in industrial and political struggles of her times, and in the consolidation of County Durham as a Labour heartland. As a councillor, she developed wide political interests in public health and town planning, attending the Royal Sanitary Institute conference held at the 1929 North East Coast Exhibition<sup>114</sup>, and was delegated to attend the meeting of the National Town Planning Council in 1934 on behalf Chester-le-Street RDC.<sup>115</sup> In 1931, when Jack Lawson was selected to

stand again as the Labour candidate for Chester-le-Street in the General Election, 'Mrs Errington seconded the nomination'.<sup>116</sup> In July 1938, when Annie Errington was appointed a magistrate<sup>117</sup>, this was the culmination of a journey which had seen her denounced as a 'Red' by Durham Tories a little more than 10 years previously—from insurrectionary challenge to the British state, to a position within the local establishment. Councillor Mrs Errington, JP, was how she was now referred to. Radical, fearless, at times uncompromising, she was embedded in her community and its mores, but operated within national and international networks. This paper seeks to rescue Annie Errington from the condescension of posterity, reveal a hidden history, and provide a record of an obscure life.

## Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1935/1929), 65.
2. *Daily Herald*, July 13, 1926.
3. I use the term 'miner's wife' advisedly. Annie Errington—and her contemporaries—used this term to describe themselves. Indeed, they seem to have taken pride in this descriptor. Two anonymous referees asked me to reconsider the use of this term because, in their view, it detracts from Annie's role as 'an activist in her own right'. But Annie apparently saw no contradiction between these two roles, as I show below.
4. These struggles are well recorded. On the history of the Durham miners' see, W. R. Garside, *The Durham Miners, 1869-1960* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971); H. Beynon and T. Austrin, *Masters and Servants: Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organization* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1994). On community-based struggles in the Durham coalfield, see J. Tomaney et al., *Social Infrastructure and 'Left Behind Places'* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2023).
5. F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, and N. Thomlinson, *Women and the Miners' Strike, 1984-1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
6. For some important exceptions to this statement see, H. Barron, *The 1926 Miners' Lockout. Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); S. Ward, 'Labour Activism and the Political Self and Inter-War Working-Class Women's Politics', *Twentieth Century British History* 30, no. 1 (2019): 29–52; M. Hedley, *Women of the Durham Coalfield in the 19th Century: Hannah's Story* (Stroud: History Press, 2019); M. Hedley, *Women of the Durham Coalfield in the 20th Century: Hannah's Daughter* (Stroud: History Press, 2021); Ewan Gibbs, *Coal Country. The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialisation in Post War Scotland* (London: London University Press, 2021). See also, Ward, 'Labour Activism'; J. Gier-Viskovatoff and A. Porter, 'Women of the British Coalfields on Strike in 1926 and 1984: Documenting Lives Using Oral History and Photography', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 19, no. 2 (1998): 199–230; Valerie Gordon Hall, 'Contrasting Female Identities: Women in Coal Mining Communities in Northumberland, England, 1900–39', *Journal of Women's History* 13, no. 2 (2001): 107–31.
7. I construct this biography from a fragmented set of sources, including newspaper records (online and physical), archives held by Redhills: the Durham Miners' Hall, Beamish Museum, Durham County Record Office, Durham University Library and Durham County Library. The biography of Annie Errington forms part of a larger study of the village of Sacriston. A fuller account of the methods deployed in this study can be found in Tomaney et al., *Social Infrastructure and 'Left Behind Places'*, chap. 3.
8. S. Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto Press, 1973).
9. J. Liddington, 'Working-Class Women in the North West: II', *Oral History* 5, no. 2 (1977): 31–45. Liddington, J. and Norris, J. *One Hand Tied Behind US. The Rise of The Women's Suffrage Movement*, 2nd ed. (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2000). The social and labour

market structure of the North West, where women were more likely to work outside the home, was quite different to the Durham coalfield.

10. L. McDowell and D. Massey, 'A Woman's Place?' in *Geography Matters! A Reader*, ed. Doreen Massey and John Allen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 129, 130.
11. B. Campbell, 'Dependable Props of the Ashington Pit', *The Independent*, December 8, 1993. Raphael Samuel offers an interesting commentary on Campbell's account; see R. Samuel, 'North and South', *London Review of Books*, June 22, 1995.
12. B. Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited* (London: Virago Press, 1984).
13. For a contemporary account of social conditions, upon which I draw here, see H. Mess, *Industrial Tyneside* (London: Ernest Benn, 1928). See also, Tomaney et al., *Social Infrastructure and 'Left Behind Places'*.
14. J. Robinson, *Tommy Turnbull: A Miner's Life* (Cheltenham: The History Press, 2007).
15. The North East of England continues to record rates of domestic abuse-related offences which are higher than the average for England and Wales. See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020#domestic-abuse-in-england-and-wales-data>
16. Hall, 'Contrasting Female Identities'.
17. Winifred Cawley, *Gran at Coalgate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974). See also: J. Tomaney, 'A Leadgate Story', 2021: <https://johnxtomaney.medium.com/a-leadgate-story-85aea3c200d2>
18. On 'companionate marriage', see A. N. Hunt, 'Companionate Marriage' in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Family Studies*, ed. C. L. Shehan (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).
19. On the lives of Jack and Bella Lawson, see J. Lawson. *A Man's Life*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1944); D. Rand. *A Durham Miner and His Wife: Jack and Bella Lawson* (Pelton: Privately Published, 2015). See also, Joseph Robinson, *Tommy Turnbull. A Miners' Life* (London: Tempus Press, 1996).
20. D. Neville, 'Hope Springs Eternal: the Life of Labour Pioneer Lisbeth Simm', *North East History* 38 (2007).
21. C. Collette, *For Labour and for Women: Women's Labour League, 1906-18* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 61.
22. E. P. Thompson, 'Homage to Tom Maguire' in *Essays in Labour History. In memory of G. D. H. Cole*, ed. A. Briggs and J. Savile (New York: St Martin's Press, 1967), 276.
23. E. P. Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980 [1963]).
24. Hall, 'Contrasting Female Identities', 121.
25. For more detail on this history see, Tomaney et al., *Social Infrastructure and 'Left Behind Places'*.
26. J. Tomaney, 'After Coal: Meanings of the Durham Miners' Gala', *Frontiers in Sociology* 5 (2020) (<https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fsoc.2020.00032>)
27. See, Tomaney et al., *Social Infrastructure and 'Left Behind Places'*.
28. K. Brown, 'The Lodges of the Durham Miners' Association, 1869-1926', *Northern History* 23 (1987): 138-52.
29. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, July 23, 1938
30. Ross, T. and Stoddart, A., *A Jubilee History of Annfield Plain Industrial Co-operative Society Ltd. 1870-1920* (Manchester: Cooperative Wholesale Society, 1921).
31. G. D. H. Cole, *A Century of Cooperation* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1944).
32. 'Cooperative Premises, Sacriston, Durham', *The Builder* 72, 2826 (1897): 323-4
33. Margaret Llewellyn Davies (ed.), *Life As We Have Known It by Co-operative Working Women* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931).
34. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, October 21, 1938.
35. This extraordinary was occasion recounted in detail in *Durham Chronicle*, August 21, 1926
36. *Durham Chronicle*, September 25, 1926.

37. Lewis Mates, *The Great Labour Unrest; Rank-and-File Movements and Political Change in the Durham Coalfield* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).
38. See, John Tomaney, 'Amy Walker Black — A Suffragist in County Durham' (2022), <https://johnxtomaney.medium.com/amy-walker-black-a-suffragist-in-county-durham-e56a7ff0ef2>
39. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, July 25, 1913.
40. *Common Cause*, January 2, 1914.
41. *Common Cause*, June 27, 1913.
42. *Common Cause*, July 25, 1913.
43. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, July 4, 1913.
44. *Common Cause*, July 3, 1914.
45. *Common Cause*, June 26, 1914.
46. *Labour Leader*, July 30, 1914.
47. *Northern Weekly Gazette*, June 15, 1907.
48. *Northern Weekly Gazette*, April 12, 1912.
49. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, August 23, 1929.
50. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, April 18, 1922.
51. See note 36 above.
52. Matters such as education, health and transport were the responsibility of county councils.
53. R. Ryder, 'Council house building in County Durham, 1900-1939: the local implementation of national policy', in *Councillor and Tenants: Local Authority Housing in English Cities, 1919-1930*, ed. M. J. Dauntton (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984).
54. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, April 24, 1931.
55. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, March 9, 1934.
56. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, May 8, 1936.
57. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, May 9, 1930.
58. *Durham Chronicle*, December 11, 1926.
59. Maureen Callcott, '1926 – Women support the Miners', *North East Labour History Society Bulletin* 19 (1985): 42.
60. Chester-le-Street Union, *Report of the Board of Guardians Appointed by the Minister for the Six Months Ending December 31, 1926*, Cmd 2018 (London: HMSO, 1927).
61. *Durham Chronicle*, February 13, 1926.
62. *Durham Chronicle*, January 30, 1926.
63. *Durham Chronicle*, July 17, 1926.
64. *Durham Chronicle*, August 14, 1926.
65. At a meeting at Chester-le-Street Cooperative Hall in January, 'A representative committee of working class organisations' was formed to protest at the relief scale set by the local Guardians. Chamberlain was attacked as 'The Minister of Death' but so too were Labour Guardians. Mr. H Malloy, chairing the meeting, told protesters, 'I am a plain Labour man, and you are all Communists here', *Durham Chronicle*, January 30, 1926. One of those criticising the Guardians was E. Hogarth, 'a Sacriston Communist', *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, February 12, 1926.
66. *Durham Chronicle*, August 7, 1926.
67. *Durham Chronicle*, August 14, 1926.
68. *Durham Chronicle*, August 28, 1926.
69. *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, September 20, 1926.
70. *Consett Guardian*, September 10, 1926.
71. *Durham Chronicle*, October 9, 1926.
72. *Consett Guardian*, October 15, 1926.
73. *Consett Guardian*, September 17, 1926.
74. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, November 2, 1926.
75. *Shields Daily News*, April 26, 1927.
76. Chester-le-Street Union, *Report of the Board of Guardians Appointed by the Minister for the Six Months Ending December 31, 1926*, Cmd 2018 (London: HMSO, 1927).
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80. Marion Phillips, *Women and the Miner's Lockout. The Story of the Women's Committee for the Relief of the Miners' Wives and Children* (London: Labour Publishing Company, 1927).
81. *The Labour Woman*, December 1926.
82. *The Labour Woman*, October 1926.
83. Personal communication from Kath Connolly, who showed me the postcards.
84. *Evening Chronicle*, October 16, 1926.
85. *Durham Chronicle*, October 23, 1926.
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87. See note 57 above.
88. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, May 12, 1936.
89. Lillian Anderson Fenn, 'County Organisation – Durham', *The Labour Woman*, August 1, 1924.
90. *The Labour Woman*, April 1930.
91. M. Gibb, 'Memories from the Past No 1: The First Durham Labour Women's Gala', *North East Labour History Society Bulletin* 19 (1985): 40.
92. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, January 20, 1933.
93. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, December 6, 1929.
94. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, October 24, 1930.
95. *Sunderland Echo and Shipping Gazette*, September 27, 1937.
96. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, September 16, 1938.
97. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, February 20, 1926.
98. *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, March 29, 1936.
99. *The Labour Woman*, July 1923.
100. *Daily Herald*, June 11, 1928; *Forward*, June 23, 1923.
101. Anderson Fenn, 'Durham'.
102. *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, August 24, 1935.
103. *Ibid.*
104. M. Gibb, *Durham County Labour Women's Advisory Council: Silver Jubilee, 1920-1945* (Durham: Redhills Miners' Hall, 1945).
105. *Ibid.*
106. *Ibid.*
107. *Ibid.*
108. Maureen Callcott, 'Labour Women', 39.
109. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, February 20, 1926. Chopwell was, at the time, the centre of Communist-inspired radicalism in the coalfield – 'Little Moscow' – in which the Lawther family were the leading lights. See, S. McIntyre, 'Red Strongholds between the Wars', *Marxism Today* 23, no. 3 (March 1979); L. Turnbull, *Chopwell's Story* (Gateshead: Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council, 1978).
110. J. Lawson, *A Man's Life*. Second Edition (London: The Epworth Press, 1944).
111. Annie Errington to Jack Lawson, September 18, 1944. GB LAW 2/1/467. Jack Lawson Papers. Durham University Special Collections.
112. Annie Errington to Jack Lawson, no date [1950?], GB LAW 1/1/58. Jack Lawson Papers. Durham University Special Collections.
113. I was asked by an anonymous referee to consider whether Annie Errington's politics were an 'expression of internalised patriarchy'. That claim cannot be tested with the data in this paper. My aim is more specific to identify the sources, extent and impact of women's political agency in the Durham coalfield in the interwar period.
114. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, June 28, 1929.
115. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, October 26, 1934.
116. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, October 16, 1931.
117. *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, July 22, 1938.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*John Tomaney* is a Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at University College London. His research concerns local and regional development, with a special focus on 'left behind places'.

## ORCID

*John Tomaney*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7648-2910>