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Men at work: Oral history and the Glasgow hard man

Mainstream historians and those specifically interested in gender, have tended, at least until very recently, to ignore the history of masculinity. The studies of Segal (1990; 1993), Connell (2000) and Roper and Tosh (1991), all have little or nothing to say about the traditional manual workplace and tend instead to focus on the family, sexual relations, or on other building blocks of masculinity, such as boys' comics and modes of play and education. Only a few writers have tried to address the traditional manual workplace, notably the work of Willis on engineering, Roper on white-collar work, and a social anthropological study by Wight on a west of Scotland mining community. (Willis, 1979; Wight, 1993)

In this paper we draw heavily upon personal testimony, including an oral history project in which we interviewed 35 male Clydeside workers who had been engaged in a range of heavy industrial jobs - predominantly mining, shipbuilding, metal working and construction. Our focus here is the west of Scotland's male-dominated heavy industries in the period from the 1930s to the 1970s. Apart from the physical nature of the work, such workplaces were invariably dangerous, with degrees of bodily damage incurred through the labour process, the pace of work and the toxicity of the working environment. Glasgow and Clydeside also developed something of a reputation for a particularly masculinised, aggressive, 'hard man' culture, reflected in, amongst other things, hard drinking and gang warfare.

Manly work on Clydeside

By the early decades of the twentieth century, Clydeside men had acquired a reputation for violence and brutality, immortalised in the best-selling gang-warfare novel based in the Gorbals, *No Mean City*.ⁱ One 'Red Clydesider', David Kirkwood, recognised elements of this in his memoirs published in 1935:

To the outsider, Glasgow men and Glasgow manners appear abrupt and rough and uncouth at all times. Even in their friendly chaff, they seem as if at any moment they would exchange fun for fists. It is a convention to appear crude.

Evidently, as in other industrial regions, Clydeside working class masculinities were initially incubated in the tough street culture of the neighbourhood. Many boys' games centred around the acting out of heroic roles - emulating the glamourised danger faced by cinema and comic book heroes, including Tarzan and John Wayne. Billy Connolly gives a good

example of how in the tenement backcourts where he grew up, boys would dare each other to jump the gaps between the washhouse (or 'steamie') roofs. One particular gap was known as the 'big sui' – sui being short for suicide! – and any boy brave enough to 'do the big sui' was instantly assured of hero status. So, actual bodily harm was risked for the sake of peer group status - although we should not lose sight of the fact that excitement and fun were important motivators here too and that some girls were involved in similar activities.ⁱⁱ

This type of competitive behaviour, though, was also transferred to the dangerous, male-dominated environment of the Clydeside workplace. Dangerous, dirty, dusty and physically exhausting work in the pits, metal works and the shipyards hardened youths up, desensitised them to danger and socialised them into a competitive, macho environment. This was a brutal world in many respects, though one mediated by the black humour, swearing and patter characteristic of these work communities as well as the street. The edge was taken off the danger and the degradation of employment by this repartee, with *macho* tale-telling of great feats, or accidents narrowly missed or of gruesome deaths and mutilations.

The work histories of oral respondents tended to express their experiences in similar heroic terms. For example, workers found composure in accounts stressing stoic struggle against exploitative managers, employers and foremen in dirty, hazardous and dusty work environments. Confrontations with the management were frequently related as a heroic struggle:

A deputy would say... 'Why is this conveyor stopped... Why is this fucking belt not going? ... Send that belt on.' And that's when you found out that men and management in general were always at loggerheads in the coal mining industry. Men and management...If you were a *weak* man you would have did what the boss said.ⁱⁱⁱ

This importance placed on not being a 'weak' man also comes across in this piece of testimony from another miner who suffered from pneumoconiosis :

Being a leading man I never ever asked any man to do anything that I couldnae do myself, and I was embarrassed walking in the tailgate in the 1970s. I tried to get in before the men got in, 'cause if they hear me panting they'd be saying 'He's done', which I presume I was, but I was embarrassed.^{iv}

For some, one of the most distinctive badges of masculinity in this period was smoking. William McIlvanney depicts this in his portrayal of Tam, a sensitive and intelligent 17 year old growing up in Ayrshire in 1955 in the novel *The Kiln*:

You really had to smoke at the dancing, he had decided. It's hard enough trying to camouflage yourself as a tough guy as it is. Go in there without cigarettes and it would be like wearing a blouse.^v

Heavy drinking was also seen by many as a sign of manhood. In many of the shipbuilding trades the distribution of wages sometimes took place in the pub. Therefore, it was very difficult not to get drawn into a drinking culture. As one shipyard worker Joe Curran commented in 1964: 'Even the man that didn't want a drink was more or less forced to have one'.^{vi} Being able to tolerate the toughest work conditions and hold ones alcohol were celebrated as praiseworthy male attributes. This is how one retired west-Scotland steel maker described his work in the furnaces in the 1930s:

About one steel worker in every ten could stand up to them successfully, which was one reason why the furnacemen were looked up to in the world of heavy industry. That they got the biggest pay packets was another reason. They also had the biggest thirsts and that too was a prideful possession in that part of the world.... A legend grew up about the steel smelters.^{vii}

Nonetheless, although there may have been a dominant strand of masculinity stemming from work in heavy industries, a wide range of relationships existed; other masculinities were expressed and attitudes changed over time. The reality, in other words, was much more fluid and complex than the dominant *machismo* discourse implies.

Something of a divide existed between what might be termed rough and respectable masculinity in the Clydeside workplace. Some craftsmen prided themselves on never breaking a wage packet, and passed their earnings intact to their wives for spending and distribution. More typical, though, was taking 'pocket money' for drink, cigarettes and a bet, and passing the remaining 'housekeeping' money over, hence never admitting the full content of the wage packet. One of our respondents revealed a glimpse of both a dominant and an alternative, less masculinised work culture in the Clydeside joinery trade in the 1960s:

The unions were quite agreeable then to bonus work, which meant that everybody was hammering away as fast as they could at floors, ceilings... Being the finer type, and not being exposed to high pressure work like that, I was allowed to work in a workshop and make up the likes of doorframes and window frames.^{viii}

There were also discernible differences between generations, with a larger proportion of younger workers rejecting the 'old ways'. For some, as they got older the bravado of working

without protection in hazardous work environments in search of higher wage packets gave way to a determination to protect themselves from insidious and longer-term bodily damage. In others, improving housing standards and smaller families helped prompt a reorientation of recreation from pub to home, hence neutering one of the primary sources of male bonding. Further, over time, de-industrialisation and the growth of the service sector also reduced the numbers exposed to the *macho* world of the pits and the yards, making it less tenable to equate manual work with masculinity.

***Machismo* and workplace health and safety**

A competitive spirit was part and parcel of *machismo* work culture, as was a high tolerance of danger and a propensity to take risks. Our own oral testimonies contain several examples of instances where *machismo* attitudes of both management and men exposed workers to serious risks and undermined health and safety.

For example, when safety helmets and protective goggles were first introduced in the 1950s and 1960s workmen initially resisted wearing them. In part this was because early versions were uncomfortable and could interfere with productivity and hence earnings. Entrenched work habits were difficult to erode. However, wearing masks, helmets and goggles was also seen – according to some testimony – as a sign of weakness and an affront to manliness.

The main difficulty, though, is trying to determine to what extent workers were taking risks because they were ‘doing the big sui’ and trying to impress their fellow workers with their manliness, or because they were trying to hold down their jobs and/or maximize their income in a harsh working environment under pressure from a profit-orientated management. What appears evident is the co-existence of two important degenerative pressures upon health and the workers’ body with the intertwining of capitalist exploitation and masculine values.

In some cases workers’ reminiscences are tempered by an awareness of the dangers that existed when they were younger. This was nicely put by a retired sheet metal worker who looked back with some remorse:

The filth that we worked in right fae 14 years of age, and being a man with no education - the only thing you had was the muscle in your arm and what experience you got with metal, and a very willingness to work. I would go in and say to people ‘Yes I’ll do that in that time.’ And whatever it took to do that I would do it. Silly now, looking back through the years, you know.^{ix}

A further question relates to the role of the trade unions regarding this type of behaviour. To some extent the unions accepted and embraced hegemonic masculinity, indeed the metal working craft unions helped to perpetuate it by supporting gender exclusion policies and by prioritising wages over occupational health issues in policy-making – e.g. in negotiating ‘danger’ and ‘dirty’ money.^x Nonetheless, on Clydeside by the 1960s some trade union branches were trying to re-educate their members to tolerate a lower risk threshold and abandon time-honoured *machismo* work practices, such as not wearing hats and not using masks or respirators. Unlike many other unions the Miners’ Federation of GB placed a high priority on occupational health and safety matters.

Emasculation?

A number of Clydeside manual workers we interviewed have had their health adversely affected by an industrial disease of some kind and many were forced – sooner or later - to give up their employment. Several have subsequently died of their occupational disease. These, then, are trauma narratives, where respondents were reflecting back at their work experience to trying and make sense of their present unhealthy predicament. Now, it has been suggested by Connell that workers such as these may try and reclaim their masculinity by drawing upon the harsh working environments which they had to endure for so long. In his view, ‘working men may embrace the process that consume their bodies, as their way of doing masculinity and claiming some self-respect in the damaging world of work.’^{xi} This was a way of exerting some control. To some extent, our oral evidence of the heroic depiction of working conditions outlined in the first section of the paper supports this argument.

In several cases when asked how industrial disability had affected their social life, one of the first things that the respondents noted was the affect on their sex life. For example, a 65 year-old miner immediately replied that his lung condition meant he was ‘too fucked to have sex.’^{xii} In another case, a retired insulation lagger informed us he was having to attend what he called ‘a dysfunctional erection clinic’.^{xiii} The loss of libido is a documented consequence of loss of employment for some male workers, recognised as early as the 1930s.^{xiv} However, coupled with this is a loss of pride brought about by not being able to perform as a man in other senses. A 50 year-old miner made this clear:

It was a big blow to me to be told that I’d never work again. Eh, your pride’s dented, ken. I mean when your out and your wife’s to come out and say to you ‘Come on I’ll get that...’ Wee jobs outside eh, that you’re no fit to do, and your son or whatever eh will say to you ‘Right come on...’ It definitely hurts your pride.^{xv}

And the widow of a quantity surveyor who had died of mesothelioma told us how almost to the last her husband had tried to play out his masculine role:

He really didn't drive very much by himself at this stage. Men are funny things. We would get in the car together here and we would drive out the gates, and then we would pull in and stop and I would take over. Men eh, don't like to give in.^{xvi}

Clearly, within such a work-dominated masculine culture the removal of employment could have deep social, physical and psychological effects. We need to think more about this and collect more evidence. What appears evident though is that the ramifications on the male psyche – especially perhaps that of the archetypal Glasgow 'hard man' – could be even more damaging where loss of the provider role was combined with physical deterioration in health as a consequence of industrial injury, disability or disease. The adjustment necessary in this forced transition from independent provider in a male-dominated work environment, to socially excluded dependent, often confined within what was perceived as the woman's domain in the home, was frequently painful and traumatic. To many brought up within the *machismo* work culture of the Clydeside heavy industries, this represented the reversal of all that encapsulated being a man.

Conclusion

The inherent dangers and harsh brutal realities of the West Scotland workplace in the heavy industries thus acted to incubate a dominant mode of masculinity. Here we see *machismo* attitudes forged in an almost exclusively male, tough and physically demanding work culture, created and reproduced in a not dissimilar way to how military service incubated ideals of masculinity. In this environment masculinity was cemented in enduring filth, brutality and risk-taking at work, and those who deviated and objected were pilloried and outcast as 'soft', sometimes castigated as endangering the squad (or compromising the capacity to maximise piecework earnings) through their unwillingness to risk their own safety. But masculine pride at work endangered lives, sapped energy and undermined health, just as other expressions of virility and *machismo* did, notably heavy drinking and smoking.^{xvii}

However, other masculinities co-existed with the 'hard man' within a diverse and sometimes contradictory and complex workplace culture. In reality relationships, attitudes and behaviour varied widely. Previous studies have emphasised how unemployment corroded manhood. However, ironically perhaps, such work could also hold the potential to emasculate because of the bodily damage that ensued from it. Thus over time, the archetypal Clydeside 'hard men' came to pay a very heavy price for their health-threatening *machismo*

attitudes and behaviour in and out of the workplace. Long-term exposure to heavy physical toil, toxins and dust inevitably took its toll on the body.

ⁱ A. McArthur and H. Kingsley Long, *No Mean City* (London, Corgi edn, 1957)

ⁱⁱ Girls had their versions of such behaviour. Meg Henderson describes, for example, the ‘test of honour’ amongst her group of young female friends in the late 1950s/early 1960s involving a jump down the final 8 stairs in her tenement close. See M. Henderson, *Finding Peggy* (London, Corgi, 1994), p. 86.

ⁱⁱⁱ CHIOHP, Interview C1

^{iv} CHIOHP, Interview C16

^v W. McIlvanney, *The Kiln* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), p 33.

^{vi} Bellamy, *Shipbuilders*, p. 106

^{vii} R. Fraser, *Work* (London, Penguin, 1969), pp. 56-7.

^{viii} CHIOHP, Interview A8

^{ix} CHIOHP, Interview A9

^x The ASE, for example, did not allow female membership until 1943. On ‘danger money’ see Johnston and McIvor, *Lethal Work*, p. 170-1. The earliest examples on Clydeside date back to the 1910s.

^{xi} Connell, *Men and The Boys*, p. 188.

^{xii} CHIOHP, Interview C10

^{xiii} CHIOHP, Interview A14

^{xiv} See Bourke, *Working Class Cultures*, pp. 132-3

^{xv} CHIOHP, Interview C2

^{xvi} CHIOHP, Interview A23

^{xvii} Mullen, *A Healthy Balance*, pp. 176-7