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## “Colourless, Dry and Dull”

### Why British Trade Unionists Lack Biographers and What (if Anything) Should be Done About it

#### ABSTRACT

Using the Trades Union Congress general council of 1925–26 as an example, this paper considers the relatively weak development of a biographical literature on such subjects within the field of British labour history. Practical and methodological challenges in the production of such lives are noted, as are the pitfalls of a genre of “tombstone” biography that can of necessity be extended only to the few. Nevertheless, the case is made for the wider employment of biographical methods in the writing of trade-union history and the problematisation in this way of the sociological stereotypes that have hitherto dominated the field. These points are further developed by specific reference to the author’s recent study of the militant trade-union leader Albert Arthur Purcell. The case is made, not only for further biographical work on such figures, but for a conception of the life-history method that recognises the distinctive articulations of both individual and collective that was characteristic of the British Labour movement.

Keywords: *trade unionism, biography, Purcell, Britain, general strike*

#### Introduction

The General Strike of May 1926 is one of the outstanding events of twentieth-century British history. For nine days some two million workers across a range of industries struck work in support of Britain’s locked out miners. All accounts agree that the discipline and solidarity shown were remarkable; as the first week passed without any real sign of the strike crumbling, the immediate outcome depended on a war of nerves between the current Conservative government and the general council of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) which was directing the strike. The crisis in the British coal industry, as Trotsky might have put it, was reduced to the crisis of leadership.<sup>1</sup> There is a considera-

1 Paraphrasing Trotsky’s famous formula in: Leon Trotsky: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International (1938). For an application of this logic in the context of

ble literature on the General Strike and this paper does not, except obliquely, make any further contribution to it. Instead, it poses the rather different question of how much we know of the individuals who comprised this leadership.

One may picture the Tory cabinet and the TUC arriving at their respective meetings. By contrasting accent, dress and carriage they seem the very image of a class society which for the moment was as sharply delineated as any polemicist or cartoonist could have wished. Beneath the top hats on the one hand, and the assorted plebeian headgear on the other, a clear historiographical distinction may also be discerned; for, of the 21 cabinet ministers, 12 have been the subjects of at least one biographical study, in most cases of a substantial scholarly character, while the corresponding figure for the 32 general council members is just five.<sup>2</sup> It is a truism that the historiography of the British Labour movement is, in general terms, both richer and more extensive than that of the Conservatives. This evident discrepancy in respect of biography for this reason only seems the more emphatic.

A different paper might consider what it tells us about British Conservatism that so much of the historical writing about it takes the form of elite-level biography, often of a very traditional kind. My object here, however, is to consider why the reverse should be true of British trade unionists, whether this really matters, and, if it does matter, if there is anything we can do to put it right. The thoughts presented derive from an attempt to reconstruct the missing life of one key figure in the General Strike, the chairman of the TUC's strike organisation committee Albert Arthur Purcell.<sup>3</sup> Over the TUC's entire history there are remarkably few examples of such studies. Those that do exist were not usually the work of historians but lives of current public figures that drew on personal contacts and were often authored by the Fleet Street industrial correspondents who flourished from the 1940s to the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> In the case of past generations, now beyond the reach of such lines of approach, the research costs involved in any full-length union biography may seem daunting and possibly difficult to justify. The "tombstone" variety of traditional political biography is not usually feasible, and even if it were it would

the General Strike, see Leon Trotsky: *My Life: An attempt at an Autobiography*, Harmondsworth 1975 edn., pp. 549–550.

- 2 Information on the cabinet ministers' biographies is derived from the bibliographical details provided in the entries on all of these figures in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 3 Kevin Morgan: *Bolshevism, Syndicalism and the General Strike. The Lost Internationalist World of A. A. Purcell*, London 2013. The reflections offered here draw in part on material discussed in the book's introductory chapter.
- 4 Biographies of the TGWU leaders Bevin and Cousins meeting this description are discussed below. Other examples include the biographies of Les Cannon (*Olga Cannon/J. R. L. Anderson: Road From Wigan Pier*, London 1973) and Arthur Scargill (*Paul Routledge: Scargill: The Unauthorized Biography*, Dunfermline 1993).

arguably sit as uncomfortably on the average union leader as the plutocratic headgear of his Tory counterparts might have.<sup>5</sup> One could reasonably maintain that the very last thing that the labour historian needs to do is borrow from the traditionalist if not openly reactionary methodologies and political outlook of Conservative practitioners like the late Lord Blake.<sup>6</sup> The argument advanced here, and as far as possible put into practice in my book on A.A. Purcell, is that a flourishing trade-union biography is nevertheless both possible and desirable, but that it requires us to think in imaginative ways about both the lives of individual trade unionists and the ways in which these lives intersected. To paraphrase Lenin this time, we need more, not fewer, of these trade union lives, but also better.

### Trade Unionists and the Interesting Bit

An appendix lists the members of our sample TUC general council in 1925–26 with a note of the principal biographical sources that may or may not be available for them. In six cases there are published autobiographies, including a group of four whose publication dates from the period of the first two Labour governments (1924–31). One might reasonably group with these the biography which the labour journalist and parliamentary candidate Mary Agnes Hamilton devoted to the 51 year-old Margaret Bondfield in 1924. Cambridge-educated and a devotee of Thomas Carlyle, between 1923 and 1938 Hamilton published popular hagiographies of a whole series of current Labour leaders, notably including Ramsay MacDonald.<sup>7</sup> In Carlylean terms these might be seen as an expression of her interest in the problem of leadership in democracy as against merely “arithmetical” conceptions of the “lowest common denominator”.<sup>8</sup> In 1924 Hamilton thus also provided a collection of shorter sketches of the first Labour cabinet under the title *Fit To Govern*. Already the previous year, the parliamentary correspondent of the *Daily Herald* had published short biographical profiles of the entire Parliamentary Labour Party as it supplanted the Liberals as the official opposition and government-in-waiting.<sup>9</sup> Both the individual and collective biography of labour’s new parliamentary elite was therefore

5 For tombstone biography see David Marquand: *Biography*, in: Matthew Flinders et al. (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of British Politics*, Oxford 2009, pp. 187–200.

6 For a robust statement of this position, see Blake: *The Art of Biography*, in: Eric Homberger/John Charmley (eds.): *The Troubled Face of Biography*, Basingstoke 1988, pp. 75–93

7 Mary Agnes Hamilton: *Margaret Bondfield*, London 1924; (Iconoclast) *Mary Agnes Hamilton: The Man of Tomorrow: J. Ramsay MacDonald*, London 1923. Other figures to receive this treatment from Hamilton included Mary Macarthur (1925), Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1932) and Arthur Henderson (1938).

8 Mary Agnes Hamilton: *Thomas Carlyle*, London 1926, ch. 6.

9 S. V. Bracher: *The Herald Book of Labour Members*, London 1923.

not neglected, and it is telling that the four general council members who published autobiographies in this period were all Members of Parliament (MPs) at the time of their writing. Bondfield, indeed, had the further distinction of being the first British woman to hold ministerial office, and it was at just this point that she was singled out by Hamilton for separate biographical treatment.

Workplace and trade-union experiences had a crucial part in this collective persona. Most of her subjects, Hamilton wrote, had known “the actual circumstances of the workers from the inside” and this was crucial to the political identity of the early Labour Party.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, experience of trade-union affairs, even at the highest levels, was not in itself enough to attract either the sympathetic biographer or the publisher interested in popular biography. This has remained largely true of academic historians. Hamilton also wrote that her subjects had escaped from poverty through personal exertion combined with “exceptional endowments of brains and character”.<sup>11</sup> Historians sympathetic to the solidaristic culture of the unions have not been much interested in representations of exceptionality. Historians less sympathetic to this culture have not much identified the unions with brains and character. The result, as Andrew Thorpe has observed, is that even where British trade unionists do have biographies, there is a sense of moving swiftly on from their union activities to get to the “interesting bit”.<sup>12</sup> This is true of all those general council members of 1925–26 who have since received the attention of biographers. Bondfield was in this sense typical, in that there was always some sort of interesting bit that went beyond their current union responsibilities and overshadowed these in their published lives.

In two cases, their TUC responsibilities can be seen as a stepping stone to some higher form of office. In the other two, they may by this time be regarded as a sort of declension into office-holding from some biographically more compelling form of activity. In the first two cases, the claim to biography, as with Bondfield, was primarily that of political office. One of them, the Railwaymen’s leader J. H. Thomas, may be dealt with briefly. Thomas held cabinet positions in both of the inter-war Labour governments and in the subsequent National Government, from which he resigned following the leaking of budget secrets before publishing his own autobiography in 1937. His published life by Geoffrey Blaxland is no more than adequate and there remains the need for a more searching treatment.<sup>13</sup> Biographically more imposing is the figure of Ernest Bevin. Though he joined the general council only in 1925, Bevin had some claim to be regarded

10 (Iconoclast) Mary Agnes Hamilton: *Fit to Govern*, London 1924, p. II.

11 (Iconoclast) M. A. Hamilton: *Fit to Govern*, p. II.

12 Andrew Thorpe: Nina Fishman’s *Arthur Horner and Labour and Political Biography*, in: *Socialist History* 38 (2011), p. 77.

13 As provided in part by Andrew Thorpe: *J. H. Thomas and the Rise of Labour in Derby: 1880–1945*, in: *Midland History* 15 (1990), pp. 111–128.

as one of its principal architects and he was certainly the dominant figure in the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), founded at the start of 1922. Bevin went on to hold high office in both the wartime coalition and the Attlee Labour governments and the biographies of Trevor Evans (1946) and Francis Williams (1952) – the latter published shortly after Bevin's death – may be seen as journalistic counterparts to the similar productions of the period of the first two Labour governments. Bevin, however, was also the first and almost the only trade unionist to attract an academic biographer on the grand scale. Here too there was the sense that other bits mattered more, and in the large and scholarly instalments of Alan Bullock's authorised trilogy five years in government count for thirty in the wider Labour movement.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in providing a detailed narrative of Bevin's earlier career Bullock's first volume, *Trade Union Leader*, has arguably been the most influential of the three, simply because it stands almost alone as a union biography conceived on the same grandiose scale as those of leading parliamentary figures. As the focus of at least half a dozen studies of varying scope and academic pretensions, Bevin remains the great exception who has attracted more biographers than the rest of his general council colleagues combined.

Appearing between 1960 and 1983, Bullock's trilogy might be taken as demarcating the brief, anaemic flourishing of trade-union biography that coincided with the halcyon years of British labour history. Its major expression was the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (DLB), an ongoing project which currently provides short biographical essays on thirteen of the general council members identified here. It was in this period that Blaxland's biography of Thomas appeared. It also saw the appearance of two other full-length studies of general council members of the mid-1920s: Ben Tillet, also of the TGWU, and Will Thorne, secretary of Britain's other big general union, the General and Municipal Workers'.<sup>15</sup> Like Bondfield, Thomas and Bevin, both of these figures spent periods in parliament, indeed in Thorne's case this extended to nearly forty years. Nevertheless, formal politics did not provide the apogee of their careers and in neither case was it the occasion for their published lives. If Bevin's belated entry into parliament marked his elevation into the role of national statesman during the national crisis of 1940, a more typical trade-union view of parliamentary nominations was as a form of superannuation to be extended to those whose active contribution to the sponsoring organisation was largely complete.<sup>16</sup> This did not usually make for scintillating parliamentary careers;

14 Alan Bullock: *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin: Volume One: Trade Union Leader, 1881–1940*, London 1960; Alan Bullock: *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin: Volume Two: Minister of Labour*, London 1967; Ernest Bevin: *Foreign Secretary, 1945–1951*, London 1983.

15 Giles and Lisanne Radice: *Will Thorne: Constructive Militant*, London 1974; Jonathan Schneer: *Ben Tillet: Portrait of a Labour Leader*, London 1982.

16 Hugh Armstrong Clegg: *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889, Volume 2, 1911–1933*, Oxford 1985, p. 356.

rather it might be regarded as recognition of contributions made to an earlier phase of their movement's development. Tillet and Thorne illustrate the point. By 1926 both were in their sixties, and their names are not so much evocative of the period of the General Strike as of an earlier era, central to Labour's collective memory, characterised by the New Unionism developing from the late 1880s and the formative years of independent political representation. Union careers in these cases certainly had their interesting bits; but by 1925–26 these had already passed. The lives of Thorne and Tillet do not therefore provide exceptions to the general neglect of inter-war trade-union biography. Rather, they allow us to see it in a clearer chronological context. The Radices' life of Thorne is subtitled *a study in new unionism and new politics* and describes this final chapter of Thorne's career as its "Aftermath" with the suggestion that he would have done better to have retired.<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Schmeer's study of Tillet also consigns this later period to the background and disposes of his activities as a general council member – a period of some eight years – in just nine lines. In 1924 Tillet was a member of a hugely controversial TUC delegation to Soviet Russia, his impressions of which he subsequently publicised widely. Two years later he travelled to America for the general council to assist in fundraising for the locked out British miners. A fuller biography might certainly have something of such activities, and one may quibble with its dismissal as merely the twilight of a career.<sup>18</sup> Even so, the essential point in the present context is that no such study is likely to have been undertaken. The unevenness of Thorne's and Tillet's biographies is symptomatic of the wider denial of biography to the trade unionists of the inter-war years, as if young and old alike existed in a sort of biographical half-light.

What lies behind this pattern of general but not unvarying neglect? One plausible line of explanation may be illustrated by reference to Zygmunt Bauman's sociological study of the British Labour movement, initially published in the 1960s in Bauman's native Polish. The study is structured around a three-part periodisation and it is the second part, *The evolution of a mass labour movement 1890–1924*, which maps most closely onto the general council members of 1925–26. Here Bauman notes the emergence of a new category of parliamentary leader such as filled the pages of the *Herald Book of Labour Members*. Assimilated into society's wider political elite, these enjoyed such status and prerogatives which may, if one may interpolate our present concerns, have included the attentions of biographers like Hamilton and her successors. At the same time, Bauman sharply distinguished between the older figure of the labour "agitator", on whose charisma and "almost monastic fanaticism" the establishment of union organisation had depended, and the more prosaic figure of the "administrator", who simply settled into the offices which the "agitators" efforts had already created for them. As depicted by Bauman, these administrators were little more than products of the superordinate reality

17 Giles and Lisanne Radice: Will Thorne: Constructive Militant, p. 101.

18 Jonathan Schmeer: Ben Tillet: Portrait of a Labour Leader, p. 218 and passim.

of the organisation: “Their personal careers depended on climbing up the rungs of a ready-made organisation ladder. The organisational machinery selected the candidates for advancement and determined their opportunities in this sphere.”<sup>19</sup> These were the figures who by the 1920s were clearly in the ascendancy. No wonder the biographer looked elsewhere.

This was the age of Mr Pooter, who doubtless would have regarded the rise of organised labour with foreboding and dismay.<sup>20</sup> Between Pooter’s city office and that of the new union bureaucracy there was nevertheless the common biographical denominator of the nobody. Thorne and Tillett were thus included by Bauman among his agitators. Schmeer offers implicit corroboration in entitling two of his later chapters on Tillett *the agitator redux* and *the agitator as patriot*. Administrators, on the other hand, appeared to Bauman as anonymous creatures of the apparatus who preferred a well-ordered desk to the platform spotlight and “hard-headed [...] statistics” to the gifts of the orator and pamphleteer. “Colourless, dry and dull”, they were thus bound by the constricting sense of office in both the physical and the functional senses of the word.<sup>21</sup> If one simply focuses on the year of the General Strike, those still performing agitational roles, or newly stepping into them, have fared a good deal better biographically. The communists of a younger generation, Harry Pollitt and J. T. Murphy, have thus both had recent biographers.<sup>22</sup> There is also a biography of the militant miners’ leader A. J. Cook, with the evident rationale that, to a degree unparalleled among his peers, he appeared as “a throw-back to the days when union officials tended to be propagandists rather than administrators”.<sup>23</sup> There is also Tillett’s contemporary and associate in the New Unionism, Tom Mann. Was it that Mann had in his later years recovered his agitational status by adhering to the Communist Party? Or should that be regarded as his admission to a sort of political counter-elite, one which rivalled its Labour counterparts if in nothing else in its attraction to biographers? Whatever the explanation, Mann had two biographies appear in the same year of 1991 and it is noticeable that in both, unlike Thorne’s and Tillett’s, the reader’s interest is engaged across the full course of Mann’s lifetime.<sup>24</sup>

19 Zygmunt Bauman: *Between Class and Elite: The Evolution of the British Labour Movement: a Sociological Study*, Manchester 1972.

20 George and Weedon Grossmith: *The Diary of a Nobody*, London, 1892.

21 Zygmunt Bauman: *Between Class and Elite: The Evolution of the British Labour Movement: a Sociological Study*, pp. 192–204.

22 Most recently, Kevin Morgan: *Harry Pollitt*, Manchester 1993; Ralph Darlington: *The Political Trajectory of J. T. Murphy*, Liverpool 1998.

23 Paul Davies: *A. J. Cook*, Manchester 1987, p. 187.

24 Chushichi Tsuzuki: *Tom Mann, 1856–1941. The Challenges of Labour*, Oxford 1991; Joseph White: *Tom Mann*, Manchester 1991.

The contrast with Mann's contemporaries on the general council is only the more striking. Between the first and second editions of Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *History of Trade Unionism* in 1894 and 1920 there was something like a quintupling in the number of full-time union officers.<sup>25</sup> Compared with the multiple literary productions on or by the Webbs and their associates, the biographical imprint of many thousands of these lives is as if of nothing. Bauman's suppositions were those of a whole mass of literature on union bureaucratisation, and on these suppositions there seemed little reason to differentiate these individuals methodologically from the offices to which they "owe[d] their being".<sup>26</sup>

### Lives for Labour

These suppositions have the further justification that they are consistent with the dominant forms of self-representation of the unions themselves. One cannot, for example, imagine a trade-union counterpart to the *Herald Book of Labour Members* already mentioned. One cannot say that the unions were anonymous in character. It is indeed rare to find the commemorative union history which does not include the portraits in word or image of pioneers or leading officers. The moral was often explicit: trade unionists were not the creatures of their union, rather it was on their continuing efforts that the survival and advance of collective organisation depended. Nevertheless, it was, as one such history put it, through their common effort and not "some superman or intellectual giant" that the "democratic method of co-operation" was pursued.<sup>27</sup> The Carlylean accent on "exceptional endowments" was missing; if the individual was singled out, it was, in accordance with the precepts of union democracy, on the basis of their office and the assumption of collective responsibilities. Often in union histories the president or general secretary is dignified with a frontispiece, just as a founding father or present-day figurehead was so often to be found on union banners. There is, however, at least one union history of the 1920s, that of Thomas's National Union of Railwaymen, in which the image of such a figure is replaced by that of the union's recently extended headquarters in London's Euston Road. It was as if collective endeavour in this instance was literally embodied in the bricks and mortar of the office itself rather than the individual who temporarily occupied it.<sup>28</sup>

25 On this see Ralph Darlington: *British Syndicalism and Trade Union Officialdom*, in: *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 25:26 (2008), pp. 106–108.

26 Zygmunt Bauman: *Between Class and Elite: The Evolution of the British Labour Movement: a Sociological Study*, p. 202.

27 Samuel Higenbottam: *Our Society's History*, Manchester 1939, foreword by Thomas Barron, chairman, Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers.

28 George W. Alcock: *Fifty Years of Railway Trade Unionism*, London 1922.



The commonest mistake in writing about British trade unions is to over-generalise about them. The potential significance of variations over time has already been noted. Differences of organisational culture, institutional origin and collective identity could be just as crucial to the relationship between the individual and the wider body. If Bevin, for example, stands out biographically among his peers, this does not only reflect the political standing he later achieved. It is also a mark both of the TGWU's considerable influence within the wider Labour movement and of the centralised and even personalised relations of power that existed within the union. Uniquely, there exist personal studies, not only of Bevin, but of a succession of TGWU general secretaries, as if they were not the union's creatures but the union, if anything, theirs. "In every respect the TGWU has been, and has been *seen* to be, the union of Bevin, Deakin, Cousins and Jack Jones", writes one of their biographers. While such individuals might not have been anything without the union, it was impossible "to separate the powerful stamp of personality from the casting of the union's 'image'."<sup>29</sup>

In some ways more characteristic of the British Labour movement, and certainly not less important than the TGWU, were the mining unions. More perhaps than any other field of industry, the coalfields have given rise to a distinct genre of miners' lives. In this case, however, the characteristic construction has been noted of an anomalous form of "plural autobiography" with the group rather than the individual at the centre. According to one commentator, it is indeed the "singular characteristic of miners' autobiographical writing ... that it is all the same!"<sup>30</sup> It is telling, for example, that Robert Smillie, one of the autobiographers on our sample general council, should have accentuated the collective in his very title *My Life for Labour*. It is also telling that the Labour leader MacDonald in his foreword should have introduced the volume as "reminiscences rather than an autobiography", a "series of tableaux in which [...] the large and the obscure actors of our time have a part".<sup>31</sup> Were it only because of their strong district basis and traditions of democracy, the mining unions neither were nor were seen to be symbiotic with any particular leading figure, and when one such figure forgot this in the 1980s their cause at very best was not assisted. Classic texts of mining union history include the official histories of the communist R. Page Arnot, first undertaken in the period of the General Strike itself. According to Dona Torr, fellow communist and the first of Tom Mann's several biographers, Arnot's great virtue was to present the union's history as one "made by people" and as far as possible recounted in their words. Through the animation of the collective, Arnot thus provided what Torr described as "in truth an autobiography [...]"

29 Geoffrey Goodman: *The Awkward Warrior: Frank Cousins, His Life and Times*, London 1979, pp. xiii-iv. For Deakin see: V.L. Allen: *Trade Union Leadership*, London 1957.

30 W.S. Howard: *Miners' Autobiography: Text and Context*, in: *Labour History Review*, 60:2 (1995), pp. 89-98.

31 Ramsay MacDonald: *Foreword*, in: Robert Smillie: *My Life For Labour*, London 1924, p. 10.

of the Miners' Federation'.<sup>32</sup> When personal histories cannot properly be described as autobiographies, and collective histories can, it sounds as if the character of biography itself is being brought into question.

There are two issues here. One is that the necessary sources for a more individualised conception of the life history may not have been created or conserved, either by the unions as collective bodies or by individual trade unionists. This was certainly not because they lacked a sense of their own history, as the commissioning of so many union histories like Arnot's amply demonstrates. Nevertheless, the prevalent forms of such histories, even ones as actively populated as Arnot's, show precisely this prioritisation of the unions' collective selves over the differentiated individual. Authorised biographies and commemorative brochures figure little in this literature. Even Bevin's legacy was treated somewhat begrudgingly by his immediate successor within the TGWU.<sup>33</sup> Quite apart from published sources, personal files do not figure much even in union archives. Membership registers provide only the most basic personal details. Arguably the defining class of union document, and the likeliest to have been preserved, is that comprising official minutes. Often these are elliptical in the extreme: the purpose is to register collective decisions, not the debates that may have lain behind them, or the differentiation of individual positions for future record. Nor, it seems, were trade unionists themselves concerned to preserve such a record. According to the immortal Pooter: "I fail to see – because I do not happen to be a 'Somebody' – why my diary should not be interesting".<sup>34</sup> However, even union somebodies did not usually maintain a diary, or files of personal correspondence, or if they did they were not necessarily preserved. It is significant that the autobiographers Bondfield and Ben Turner were also among the TUC's diarists of the 1920s. But in Turner's case at least it is only through his autobiography that we know of his diary, whose current whereabouts are unknown.<sup>35</sup> In this case it is not the writing of such a document that is lacking but its preservation for the use of future biographers.

Again there is an obvious contrast between the cabinet ministers of 1926 and the TUC leaders who so hesitantly defied them. Of the twenty-one ministers, the majority have groups of personal papers listed by the British National Register of Archives, along with groups of out-correspondence and similar papers amounting in Churchill's case to as many as III separate references. Of the 32 members of the general council, on the other hand, 25 have no entry on the National Register of Archives listing at all. For the miners' leader Tom Richards there are only "bank books as General Secretary of the South Wales Miners Federation", biographically unpromising and mistakenly ascribed to

32 Dona Torr: *The Miners' Autobiography*, in: *Labour Monthly*, August 1949, pp. 239–242.

33 Geoffrey Goodman: *The Awkward Warrior: Frank Cousins, His Life and Times*, p. 58.

34 George and Weedon Grossmith: *The Diary of a Nobody*, p. 15.

35 Bondfield's papers are held by Vassar College in the United States. For published references see note 51 below.

a trade unionist of the same name from the English midlands. Bevin, Thomas and Tillet alone have more than a handful of references, and Bevin and Bondfield alone substantial deposits of personal papers. Bevin not only took greater care of his personal papers than most other union leaders but he took pains to offer personal account of his conduct after an event like the General Strike. He was adept at cultivating journalistic contacts – two, after all, obliged him with biographies – and filed away the resulting cuttings as if in anticipation of such productions.<sup>36</sup> If Bevin compared to his colleagues has enjoyed unusual levels of biographical attention, one obvious factor is that it is manifestly feasible to write his biography.

There is however a second consideration. That the unions themselves made relatively little of the self-representation of the individual, whether through print or archive, raises questions as to how appropriate it is to import into such a culture the accentuated differentiation of the conventional biography. Hugh Clegg was a hugely influential figure in the emerging academic discipline of industrial relations and the author or co-author of the standard histories of British trade unionism covering the period of Bauman's "evolution of a mass labour movement".<sup>37</sup> One could hardly refer to them as the unions' autobiography, and they show little concern with the elements of self-representation to be found in Arnot's mining histories. Institutional histories in the manner of the Webbs, they began – give or take a chapter – where the Webbs left off, and reserved the element of biography for brief individual profiles appearing either as footnotes or, in the second volume, as a biographical appendix. Excluding everything except such forms of office and nomination (including parliamentary nomination) that arose directly from union employment, the profiles convey the superordinate authority of the union as collective actor through which the individual is traced only as career path. To the agitator like Mann, the organisation had always been secondary and subordinate. As pared down by Clegg, it meant that all but two of the last 41 years of Mann's life are unaccounted for.<sup>38</sup>

Despite these limitations, Clegg's priorities were not so very different from those of the union histories from which he must, in part, have derived his data.<sup>39</sup> Beatrice Webb

36 This point is discussed further below.

37 Hugh Armstrong Clegg/Alan Fox/A. F. Thompson: *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume 1: 1889–1910*, Oxford 1964; Clegg: *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889, Volume 2, 1911–1933*, Oxford 1964.

38 Hugh Armstrong Clegg: *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889, Volume 2, 1911–1933*, p. 577. This marks a narrowing from the first volume, though in both cases all reference to Mann's extensive activities overseas is excluded, as indeed is any reference to the positions held by trade unionists within international organisations.

39 It is symptomatic that for the Labour Who's Who directory, first produced in 1924, the subjects of entries were evidently invited to provide a note of their recreations. Of our sample TUC general council, two mentioned politics, seven some form of sport and at least twelve

wrote of the co-operative movement that she had “failed to discover [...] any one man, or even group of men, who have contributed in an absolutely pre-eminent degree” and that its achievement represented the “joint work of thousands of honest, capable, self-devoted citizens”.<sup>40</sup> It was in just this spirit that the Webbs wrote their *History of Trade Unionism*, though one is bound to say that its biographical footnotes are both fuller and less formulaic than those of Clegg and his colleagues. A figure like A. A. Purcell, so central to the conduct of the General Strike, is thus collapsed by Clegg into a series of offices; the justification might be that this is consistent with the contemporary published profiles of the TUC, albeit that these show a somewhat greater willingness to record political and international responsibilities. Slightly fuller encapsulations of Purcell’s career may already be found in both the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* and in both old and new versions of the *Dictionary of National Biography* – the latter contributed by the present author. Why, in a case like Purcell’s, might one seek to go beyond the confines of such a format, and what are the possibilities of doing so should one decide to?

## Biography and the Sociological Type

The alternative to biography is the stereotype. Labour history abounds in these, and interpretations of British trade-union history in this period include a number of stereotypes and dichotomies of somewhat schematic character. One is the labourist reading that postulates an essentially homogeneous trade-union interest that is seen as providing the dominant culture or ethos of the labour movement as a whole.<sup>41</sup> Another is the rank-and-file reading which posits a sharp opposition between the moderate union officer and the more combative figure of the grassroots activist.<sup>42</sup> A third, of course, is Bauman’s construction of the agitator and the administrator. These are overlapping and not just competing interpretations, and Bauman’s approach epitomised the dichotomisation on which all of them in some way depended. Indeed, Bauman strongly maintained that his were “very different sociological types”, rarely found in combination and demanding

none at all – excluding those who appear not to have made personal return. Only Turner provided the more expansive *A book, pipe of 'bacca and chat with a pal*.

40 Beatrice Potter (Webb): *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*, London 1891, pp. 90–92.

41 Works in this tradition include Henry M. Drucker: *Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party*, London 1979; Ross McKibbin: *The Evolution of the Labour Party: 1910–1924*, Oxford 1983 edn.; David Marquand: *The Progressive Dilemma*, London 1992 edn.

42 For a taste of the debate see the contributions by Jonathan Zeitlin, Richard Price and James Cronin in: *International Review of Social History* 34:2 (1989), pp. 54–98 *passim*.

different skills, psychologies and character traits.<sup>43</sup> An obvious possible complicating factor was the existence in many cases of political commitments and associations that could offset as well as reinforce these formulaic roles. As reflected in partisan narratives of either communist or Labour loyalist provenance, this, however, also encouraged a sort of dichotomisation, at the expense historiographically of those that fitted neatly into neither one nor the other.

Purcell was one such case. If he was no more a typical trade unionist of his time than anyone else, what is interesting about him are the questions his career raises about any such assumptions of typicality. As with any active trade unionist, his trade was a crucial component of his identity, but in a sinuous and ambiguous way. Compared with the Railwaymen, the Mineworkers or the general unions, Purcell's unions in the furnishing trades were veritable minnows. If Bevin as putative "man of *power*" was inseparable from his power base,<sup>44</sup> Purcell's national standing was consequently more evanescent and rested on a flimsier basis. As a paid union officer from 1898, when he was aged just twenty-five, his union position provided the springboard for a wide-ranging career for which it remained a continuing precondition and which it nevertheless manifestly outstripped. From his earliest years Purcell was active in the trades councils and the wider movements which they promoted. In the 1920s he enjoyed two spells representing different industrial constituencies in the House of Commons, where admittedly his contribution and attendance were intermittent. During the brief flourishing of guild socialism he was also instrumental in setting up one of Britain's handful of working guilds, the short-lived Furniture and Furnishing Guild.

Most significantly for his career, Purcell spent nine years on the TUC general council (1919–28) and for a three-and-a-half year period in the mid-1920s enjoyed an extraordinary notoriety as the foremost of the so-called lefts who appeared to exercise a temporary ascendancy over the TUC. Already in 1920 he was a member of the first British Labour delegation to Soviet Russia. Four years later he led the TUC delegation, also including Tillet, whose glowing report on the Soviet regime was widely circulated internationally. These contacts led the following year to the establishment of the famous joint council of the British and Russian trade unions, in which Purcell again was one of the leading actors. Along with the Dutchman Edo Fimmen he was the leading advocate of a conception of working-class unity that extended to the communist-aligned unions including those in Russia itself. When he put such a case to the American Federation of Labour (AFL), delegates roared their disapproval and the *Washington Post* demanded his deportation. Such an unabashedly pro-Bolshevik stance would have been contentious in any circumstances. Purcell, however, combined it in just this period with the presidency of the International

43 Zygmunt Bauman: *Between Class and Elite: The Evolution of the British Labour Movement: a Sociological Study*, p. 201.

44 Geoffrey Goodman: *The Awkward Warrior: Frank Cousins, His Life and Times*, p. xiv.

Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), whose continental affiliates and permanent officials overwhelmingly rejected such a stance. The result was a state of continuous tension that came to a head at IFTU's acrimonious Paris congress in August 1927.

One could not exactly describe such a career as uneventful. Some of these fields of activity, particularly in the international sphere, have given rise to exhaustive scholarship in which Purcell's role as protagonist is certainly not overlooked. Calhoun's study of the Anglo-Russian committee runs to over four hundred pages and at first sight appears to be a comprehensive record.<sup>45</sup> Purcell also features prominently in Van Goethem's reconstruction of the world of IFTU, and in neither of these accounts is the aspect of interpersonal relations in trade-union affairs overlooked.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Van Goethem has extremely helpful biographical profiles, though it is characteristic of the field that these appear as endnotes, dislocated from the main narrative to the detriment of possible biographical insight into the alignments and cleavages which are otherwise so clearly delineated. In the text itself Van Goethem thus brusquely cites the verdict of one of IFTU's officers, the German Johannes Sassenbach, that Purcell was a man "without culture, knowledge or experience".<sup>47</sup> Though Van Goethem does not exactly endorse this judgement – he merely adds that "almost everyone" recoiled from the prospect of Purcell becoming IFTU president – he offers no basis on which to reach a more measured assessment. How a friendless Purcell could actually have come to occupy this or any other position of responsibility remains difficult to fathom.

The case for bringing a clearer biographical dimension to such studies has nothing to do with the superman or Beatrice Webb's pre-eminent group of leaders. Beyond the differentiation of the individual, or rather by means of such differentiation, it is the multi-layered complexity of the social that a life-history approach may bring into sharper focus through the inter-connections between diverse political, industrial and other social forms of belief and association. To recover Purcell as a personality is to pick one's way through a veritable maze of factional allegiances, organisational interests and occupational solidarities, all expressed in forms of association and dissociation both over time – through the identification of more or less distinct generational cohorts – and across both national and subnational markers of space. Using the word in a rather different sense from that intended by Sassenbach, it is simply inconceivable that one could come to the fore in such an environment bereft of culture and experience. Establishing what these

45 Daniel F. Calhoun: *The United Front: The TUC and the Russians 1923–1928*, Cambridge 1976, new edn. 2008.

46 Geert Van Goethem: *The Amsterdam International: The world of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) 1913–1945*, Aldershot 2006.

47 Geert Van Goethem: *The Amsterdam International: The world of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) 1913–1945*, p. 91.

differences of culture were, and why they mattered, may be one of the principal insights which a biographical method offers.

With his trade unionist's gut instinct and suspicion of the middle-class politician, Purcell was the epitome of a sort of militant labourism. Nevertheless, his personal history does not bear out the view that its ethos was successfully imposed upon the British Labour movement as a whole. If anything it provides a symbol of its marginalisation. Within the Labour Party itself Purcell's influence was always circumscribed, and already in the 1920s trade unionists of his type were becoming overshadowed by such socially exogenous elements as the future fascist Mosley – who has naturally had his several biographers. In a longer perspective, a prosopographical approach demonstrates the progressive exclusion of the active trade unionist from Labour's parliamentary elite, and biographically this may be registered in Purcell's premature withdrawal from the national political scene at the end of the 1920s.

Purcell himself was not so much concerned with the division of parliamentary spoils as with the assertion of the unions' independent authority through the TUC. It was this that was put to the test in 1926, and according to the radical narratives of the General Strike that began to appear immediately afterwards it was a test that the TUC left had manifestly failed. Purcell's reputation never recovered, and to this extent he provides a case study in the rank-and-file critique of even the well-meaning bureaucrat. In reviewing his career, it is nevertheless implausible to regard him as intrinsically less militant than the unions' wider membership. The least that one can say is that such arguments have only ever been made at a level of abstraction in which the biographical trajectories of leaders and members alike are hazy. One might perhaps group Purcell with Cook as a survival of the figure of the agitator. Indeed, Purcell had been a convert to syndicalism through the personal influence of Mann, and in 1910 had chaired the inaugural conference of Mann's Industrial Syndicalist Education League – the only significant attempt in Britain at a distinct syndicalist organisation. Purcell's premature displacement from a national leadership role, or his perceived ineffectuality in occupying one, might in this case appear to confirm Bauman's general thesis regarding the coming of the administrator. On the other hand, Bauman's supposition of "very different sociological types" seems entirely inadequate to the complexities of such a career. Like any good administrator, Purcell was not only a skilled trade-union negotiator, but positively advertised his proficiency as arbitrator.<sup>48</sup> He did so, nevertheless, in just that period that he was regarded as foremost of Britain's "Communitic trade union leaders" and one of the "budding Lenins" and fire-eaters whom the General Strike was to expose.<sup>49</sup> There may be many

48 See the official profile in: *Russia: The official report of the British trades union delegation to Russia and Caucasia*, November and December 1924, London 1925, p. ix.

49 Passfield papers, British Library of Political and Economic Sciences, Beatrice Webb diaries, entry for 17 August 1925; *Yorkshire Evening News*, 27 May 1926, cited Alan Bullock: *The Life*

explanations of his conduct, but a psychological aversion to agitational roles is surely not one of them.

In seeking to get beyond these generic suppositions, a life of Purcell might in theory encompass a number of different possible lines of approach. One is the reconstruction of a political trajectory that took in membership or office in all the major parties of the British left, including the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), whose founding resolution he moved. Another is the recovery of a philosophy of trade-union action to which all such political commitments were, to the extent that Purcell remembered his syndicalist precepts, more or less consciously subordinated. A third, crucial dimension would focus on the specificities of trade and occupational culture which, in the case of the radical Furnishing Trades, offer one of the keys to Purcell's distinctive conception of militancy, and yet which nevertheless had to be reconciled with broader claims of class or movement. Finally, a biography might hope to explore the more or less formalised networks and personal associations through which such disparate forms of activity were pursued. Referring to these diverse "programmes, platforms, policies and manifestos" of the Labour movement, Purcell once observed that he had "been in at the drafting and distribution of millions of them".<sup>50</sup> Even so, those appearing under his own name would hardly add up to a substantial brochure. It is, once more, the sociality of the individual that biography may seek to recover. From Tom Mann and the inventor of guild socialism Samuel George Hobson, to international collaborators like Edo Fimmen and the Russian Mikhail Tomsy, it is through such diverse encounters and collaborations that Purcell's relation to wider political developments can be traced, and the issues of social and cultural identity explored which in any such association had to be negotiated.

### But not in Circumstances of our Choosing

One could imagine a biography of any number of such figures and not be able to write it. In that sense, we are all historical materialists: men write histories, Marx might have said, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. Purcell, for example, left no papers of his own. Researching his career turned up barely half a dozen personal letters, and only one of these – a letter of retrospection to Mann – could be described as illuminating. No memoir exists beyond the obituaries published on Purcell's death in 1935. The only labour diarists whose paths crossed much with his were the TUC's acting secretary at the time of the General Strike, Walter Citrine, and Margaret Bondfield, who travelled with him on the first of Labour's Russian delegations.<sup>51</sup> The biographers of Stanley Baldwin,

and Times of Ernest Bevin: Volume One: Trade Union Leader, 1881–1940, p. 319.

50 Albert Arthur Purcell: *Towards a New Policy*: V, in: *Labour Monthly* 6:5 (1924), pp. 268–269.

51 Citrine's diaries are held in the British Library of Political and Economic Science; see: Robert Taylor: *Citrine's Unexpurgated Diaries, 1925–26: The Mining Crisis and the National Strike*,



head of the government side in 1926, excuse the 1,100 pages they devote to him on the grounds that anything less would have been an essay.<sup>52</sup> There is no such scope for proximity in Purcell's case.

On the other hand, thinking of Baldwin also calls to mind Philip Williamson's argument that politics crucially is a public activity, and that those like Baldwin who engaged in it are properly studied through the public sphere in which alone they existed for a wider population.<sup>53</sup> Paul Pickering, biographer of the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor, cites his fellow Australian Judy Brett: "the public man *is* the real man". He also notes how O'Connor at the peak of his career claimed that he "never wrote a private political letter to any man".<sup>54</sup> There are certainly resonances here for the biographer of Purcell. Even on those occasions when he did venture into reminiscence, Purcell's presentation and narrative voice were curiously impersonal. Typical was a retrospective *Four Great Demonstrations* article he wrote on being confirmed IFTU's president, which began with a personal pronoun so self-effacing as to be virtually buried.<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, Purcell, no less than Baldwin, had a distinct public persona which in the period of his greatest fame can be traced through comparable sources such as Hansard or the national press, which in this period included a particularly flourishing labour press. With financial assistance from the Russians and editorial assistance from their British supporters, Purcell briefly even had his own press vehicle in the shape of the monthly *Trade Union Unity*, of which he was nominal co-editor with Fimmen and TUC left, George Hicks. As MP first for Coventry (1923–24) and then the Forest of Dean (1925–29) he was also the beneficiary of what was then a similarly flourishing local press. Local newspapers devoted considerable resources both to election contests and to constituency appearances by a sitting MP, and vivid and detailed accounts exist of Purcell's views on a wide range of issues. Drawing on his trade-union experience, and a democratic view of representation dating at least as far back as O'Connor's time, Purcell as MP for Coventry held open report-back meetings to review parliamentary business

in: *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 20 (2005), pp. 67–102; extracts from Bondfield's diary appeared in Margaret Bondfield: *A Life's Work*, London 1948. There are fragmentary references in Ben Turner: *About Myself 1863–1930*, London 1930.

52 Keith Middlemas/John Barnes: *Baldwin: A Biography*, London 1969, p. xiv.

53 Philip Williamson: *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 14–15.

54 Pickering: *Feargus O'Connor: A Political Life*, London 2008, p. 2.

55 "Demonstrations have played, and still play, such an important part in the history of the progress of the working classes towards the full realisation of that ideal commonwealth which they alone have the will to construct, that it may not be either uninteresting or uninstructive to recall the features of four of these striking occasions which seem to me to have a particular significance in relation to developments during the last three decades." (*Labour Magazine* 3:3 [1924], pp. 182–3)

and justify the way he had voted. Through the assiduous attendance of its reporters, readers of the *Coventry Herald* were thus provided with summaries of his *Weekly Address* which are of inestimable benefit to researchers.

Graham Greene described autobiography as “a sort of life” which in the nature of things missed out both the earliest part and the last.<sup>56</sup> A public life based on transitory fame might be more partial still. Not only is there uneven insight over time. Unavoidably, the accent will also be on the “externality” which Bernard Crick, in his biography of George Orwell, preferred to the “empathetic fallacy” characteristic of literary if not always of political biography.<sup>57</sup> Crick makes the point that Orwell was in any case not the Bloomsbury-type figure for whom a personal diary and correspondence were maintained as if as a set of memoranda for future biographers. There is then a parallel here with Purcell. If so much of what Orwell represents is to be found in his journalism, practices like Purcell’s *Weekly Address* similarly suggest that other forms of communication mattered more to the trade unionist than the sorts of private correspondence that lure biographers in search of a subject.

Purcell may not have left a record of his exchanges with individual trade unionists. On the other hand, over some eighteen years as a National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association (NAFTA) officer in some or other capacity he accounted for himself to the union’s members through its printed *Monthly Report*. The title may seem colourless, descriptive and altogether less enticing biographically than Orwell’s *As I Please* column in the Labour weekly *Tribune*. Even so, within the journal’s pages different officers speak with identifiable voices in which distinct conceptions of the union’s objects are combined with personal reflection and the anecdotalism of the day-to-day pursuit of control of the labour supply. In Purcell’s early contributions, the sense of combat and frustration of the syndicalist union organiser are vividly evoked, along with the expectation of a moment of social reckoning. Later the compass widens to take in his involvement in national affairs and the impressions he picked up on his foreign travels. Least of all was his manner dry: after the successful conclusion of one dispute, he paid heartfelt tribute to the band at the following day’s demonstration as “washing the refuse from the regions of the liver, forcing the heart to beat uniformly, pushing the mental fog away, jerking the limbs and revitalising the muscles”. It was with just this easy camaraderie that Purcell slipped into an us-and-them idiom of plebeian wonderment and derision in describing parliamentary mores in his Coventry report-back meetings. From the denatured worker who had joined the strike-breaking police, to the American cult of hustle and bigness, Purcell’s reports ranged over the disparate phenomena he encountered in tones of satire or invective, to which the no less vivid evocation of workers’ solidarity offered antidote and alternative.

56 Graham Greene: *A Sort of Life*, London 1971.

57 Bernard Crick: *George Orwell: A Life*, Harmondsworth 1982 edn., pp. 29–34.

It nevertheless remains a sort of life. Born in 1872, Purcell's early experiences in London included temperance activities, boxing bouts, a spell as local councillor and association with Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling in the eight hours movement. There is certainly a story to be unearthed here. Nevertheless, for details of these early activities I relied on biographical profiles appearing when Purcell later stood for elected public office, and a better documented account would require extensive research into the sources for late Victorian metropolitan radicalism. Though a full biography may not always be achievable, it is nevertheless in the discipline of the biographical method that the wider significance of such a contribution will lie. Thematically organised and focusing on the public persona, Williamson's *Baldwin* is expressly intended as an alternative to biography. It is also an avowedly top-down approach, one that effectively re-conceives the individual as public institution, and which may therefore be denied those deemed neither original nor important enough to repay such examination. Within a Conservative Party context overloaded by conventional biographies, in which the party leader undoubtedly was a sort of institution, Williamson's approach has its own distinct advantages. Conversely, within a Labour movement context dominated by institutional narratives, the case for a biographical or prosopographical approach may lie precisely in the insight that it offers into the delimited scope of the institution itself.

I therefore approached Purcell's biography, not so much for the elusive glimpse of personality, nor even for a more outward-facing life and times, but to seek out the connections and transitions by which even the seemingly straightforward trade-union life was shaped. The nineteenth-century shipwright John Gast was another figure combining wide associations with a paucity of personal documentation, and in taking Gast as his organising subject Iorwerth Prothero conceded the impossibility of a conventional biographical treatment. In seeking to reconstruct the diverse aspects of a public life and the interconnections between them, Prothero's rationale was nevertheless to get beyond the "artificial" compartmentalisation of activities into the political, industrial, co-operative and educational fields.<sup>58</sup> Approaching any individual in this way means conceiving of them, not just as an agent, but as a site through which wider issues may be explored.<sup>59</sup> If they therefore provide the occasion for revisiting these issues, there is no reason why such a study may not be broadened to introduce other perspectives by which a central protagonist may themselves be contextualised within a wider web of relationships. When Purcell in 1924 returned from Russia extolling the virtues of the Bolshevik regime, he prompted an international outcry which I sought to explore through the unavailing efforts of the anarchist Emma Goldman, then living in Britain, to organise a movement

58 Iorwerth Prothero: *Artisans and Politics in early Nineteenth-Century London: John Gast and His Times*, Folkestone 1979, p. 4 and *passim*.

59 See the discussion in June Hannam and Karen Hunt: *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s*, London 2002, ch. 2.

of counter-propaganda and *exposé*. That Purcell's appearance at the convention of the AFL should similarly have revealed so strong a mutual antipathy was an issue I explored through a broader comparative discussion of attitudes to America and Americanism on the British and wider European left.<sup>60</sup> The aim is not so much a life and times as a sense of the relationships and interconnections that make up a life. Another anarchist, Peter Kropotkin, originally thought of calling his own, actually rather conventional book of memoirs *Autour de sa vie* or *Around one's life*. Both through and around a life like Purcell's, one may hope to reconstruct its multiple meanings not only as a site but as a series of political and cultural interventions on the part of the individual concerned.

### Concluding Thoughts: Limits and Possibilities of Labour Biography

The late Nina Fishman devoted the final years of her life to the biography of the South Wales miners' leader, Arthur Horner. One of a new generation of agitators at the time of the General Strike, Horner was already a prominent figure in the CPGB but over the course of his career succeeded in reconciling this commitment with occupancy of high trade-union office culminating in the general secretaryship of the National Union of Mineworkers at the time that the coal industry was nationalised.<sup>61</sup> Here there is evidently a challenge to some prevalent labour history stereotypes, and Fishman undertook the task on a scale comparable with Bullock's Bevin, indeed exceeding it in respect of its subject's trade-union activities. Like Samuel Gompers, our attitude to the prospect of such biographies might simply be 'more': not only historians of the mining unions but students of British communism or of post-war nationalisation can hardly fail to derive new insight from Fishman's extended biographical perspective. On the other hand, there are also costs to consider. Initially undertaken by Hywel Francis, Fishman's study was some thirty years in the making; as Thorpe has pointed out, not only is it almost without parallel in British trade-union historiography but it is likely to remain so.<sup>62</sup> Other biographical studies may certainly be anticipated, but in the current publishing and academic environment one simply cannot conceive of a proliferation of studies on anything like the scale of Bullock's Bevin or Fishman's Horner.

60 Aspects of this question are also explored in Kevin Morgan and Norman LaPorte: Learning from the future: Begegnungen Deutscher und Britischer Gewerkschafter mit Amerika in den Zwanzigerjahren, in: Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismus-Forschung (2012), pp. 129–143.

61 Nina Fishman: Arthur Horner: a Political Biography, Volume 1 and 2, London 2010.

62 Andrew Thorpe: Nina Fishman's Arthur Horner and Labour and Political Biography, in: Socialist History 38 (2011), pp. 72–88.

We will therefore have to do with less, and can take no solace from the Miesian adage that less is more in a historiographical context in which the biographical visibility of just a handful of figures can have a positively distorting effect. Bullock's life of Bevin illustrates the point. Presented by its author as shedding light on a wider Labour movement history not otherwise studied from within, Bullock's account has for half a century remained without a rival in its field, widely and often uncritically cited, and flattening out the complexities of great collectivities through the simplifying device of the transcendent personality. Neil Riddell has justly observed how Citrine as TUC secretary has suffered historiographically from Bevin's overshadowing presence.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, it is arguable that Citrine's own two volumes of autobiography have had a similar if more limited distorting effect. It is Citrine, for example, who tends to be excluded from generalisations regarding the TUC's parochialism, in disregard of such professed internationalists as Purcell and his colleague Fred Bramley who enjoyed a predominancy at the TUC at the time that Citrine took his first faltering steps there.<sup>64</sup>

Through a more diversified biographical literature we do not therefore just fill out some bigger picture but may in some cases offer radically different perspectives on what appears to be historiographically well established. Two examples may be given from the life of Purcell. Despite the deployment of 'craggy mountains' of documentary evidence regarding the Anglo-Russian trade union committee of the mid-1920s,<sup>65</sup> no real indication is provided as to why the lumbering and parochial British unions should alone have warmed to the Russians in this way, and at this particular moment. Biography is not itself the explanation, but it does provide a route by which some sort of explanation may be attempted. In particular, the British figures who were instrumental at every stage of this unexpected development, namely Purcell and the TUC secretary Bramley, shared a common background as industrial organisers in the same, relatively tiny Furnishing Trades' association, which they combined with an active involvement in socialist politics. Tracing back these overlooked career histories, whose close interconnections existing accounts entirely overlook, opens up a distinctive discourse of trade-union internationalism to which no British union had given fuller expression than NAFTA, and which the

63 Neil Riddell: *Walter Citrine and the British Labour movement 1925–1935*, History, 278 (2000), p. 287.

64 For the TUC's parochialism, see e.g.: Robert Taylor: *The TUC: From the General Strike to New Unionism*, Basingstoke 2000, pp. 15, 61–66; Stephen Howe: *Anticolonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire 1918–1964*, Oxford, 1993, p. 77. For an account indebted to Citrine and institutionalising his own perspective, see: Marjorie Nicholson: *The TUC Overseas: The Roots of Policy*, London 1984.

65 Daniel F. Calhoun: *The United Front: The TUC and the Russians 1923–1928*, p. 409.

union had officially maintained throughout, and in opposition to, the First World War.<sup>66</sup> Rather than the positivist simulacrum of natural history that is sometimes alleged, the biographical method can thus be recommended precisely as a form of decentred critical history.

The second example is the General Strike itself. Here one may trace how a version of events originally propounded by Bevin, and documented in his papers, was disseminated through Bullock's biography, and thence through standard narrative histories like Clegg's, to which a communist or rank-and-file counter-narrative appears to provide the only possible alternative. In these standard narratives, the General Strike appears as the last gasp of an irresponsible impulse to direct action, which only Bevin's superior generalship was able to retrieve from a complete fiasco.

In reality, the movement for direct action had peaked some half-a-dozen years earlier, and it is almost impossible to trace the supposed advocacy of a general strike on the part of Purcell and those with whom he associated. To the extent that the possibility of such an action was ever alluded to, it was almost invariably as a demonstration strike of limited duration, and it was this perspective that Purcell advanced on the very eve of the General Strike. The action actually undertaken – at once partial in character and unlimited in duration – was the brainchild of Bevin alone, and conceived at least as much as a flanking manoeuvre against Labour militants as a means of bringing pressure to bear on the government. Abysmally ill-conceived and ineffective according to its own terms, it makes sense only as a calculating exercise in the rationalisation of the TUC on the basis of a disciplined central authority within which the likes of Purcell were comprehensively marginalised. The generalisation of biography, paradoxically, may therefore be seen as corrective to an overly individualised or “great man” view of history which has become embedded, as it has in this instance, in institutional narratives.

In the midst of pursuing other lines of enquiry, it nevertheless took eighteen years to pull together the materials for even a sort of life of Purcell. Even now, there will be new insights and doubtless revisions to be made when the British secret state makes available the files of opened letters and intercepted communications it kept on such individuals. One cannot set too much store by lives that take as long in writing as the subjects took in living them. But one may, and should, make fuller use of a biographical method without having to replicate biographical forms as most commonly understood.

One way, as attempted in my books on Purcell and the Webbs, is precisely that of working from and around the individual subject (or pair of subjects).<sup>67</sup> Another is to

66 For Bramley see: Kevin Morgan: *Class Cohesion and Trade-union Internationalism: Fred Bramley, the British TUC and the Anglo-Russian Advisory Council*, in: *International Review of Social History*, forthcoming 2013.

67 Kevin Morgan: *The Webbs and Soviet Communism: Bolshevism and the British Left* part two, London 2006.

develop the wider biographical agenda that in Britain may be identified in particular with the DLB. Now running to thirteen volumes and containing essays on well over a thousand Labour movement figures of diverse origins and career trajectories, the DLB has been universally commended for its editorial standards including the provision in some cases of special subject notes and bibliographies. Nevertheless, for scale and scholarly impact it is certainly overshadowed by the Maitron project in France, which reportedly now claims over 130,000 entries and has served as stimulus to the prosopographical understanding of labour movements through wide-ranging colloquia and publications and the collation of entries meeting more specific criteria, whether social, political or geographic. Very much in the British fashion, the DLB accumulated incrementally according to the supply of entries for the most part compiled on an individual basis. As the appendix below illustrates, the coverage is therefore uneven, not to say haphazard, exactly as is the production of larger-scale studies, be they of a Bevin, a Horner or a Purcell. It has certainly not been part of the dictionary's remit to get beyond the individual subject and seek to begin in pulling their interconnections together.<sup>68</sup> Nothing, however, could provide a better basis on which to develop the insights of collective and comparative biography and recover the sense of interlocking human agencies which has been missing in so much British labour history, whether dominated by the individual or by the institution.

### Appendix: Biographical Sources for TUC General Council Members 1925–6

The table below provides details of general council members by (i) name; (ii) union represented; (iii) dates of election to TUC general council (until 1921 parliamentary committee; membership usually continued to the year following the last election); (iv) available biographical sources.

The note of available biographical sources indicates successively:

- (a) DNB: an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
- (b) DLB: an entry in the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (13 vols, 1972–2010)
- (c) NRA: an entry on the personal name index of the National Register of Archives now maintained as part of the National Archives. In the case of Richards, as noted above, a group of non-personal papers is cited but ascribed to a different individual
- (d) Clegg: an entry in the biographical appendix to Hugh Armstrong Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889*. Volume 2: 1911–1933, Oxford 1985
- (e) Autobiography: a note of any published autobiography with date of publication

68 Something on these lines is however attempted in: William Knox (ed.: *Scottish Labour Leaders 1918–1939: A Biographical Dictionary*, Edinburgh 1984.

- (f) Any other substantial published lives listed by author name and year of publication. Details of these are derived from the Oxford DNB and exclude only a privately published tribute to John Hill published in pamphlet form.

It will be noted that in 12 cases this field is entirely blank.

<b>(i)</b>	<b>(ii)</b>	<b>(iii)</b>	<b>(iv)</b>
J Beard	Workers' Union	1920–34	Clegg
E Bevin	Transport & General Workers	1925–39	DNB; DLB; NRA (16); Clegg; T Evans 1946; F Williams 1952; A Bullcock (3 vols) 1960–83; M Stephens 1981; P Weiler 1993
M Bondfield	General & Municipal Workers	1917–23, 1925–8	DNB; DLB; NRA (4); Clegg; autobiography 1948; M A Hamilton 1924
H Boothman	Operative Cotton Spinners	1919–35	
J W Bowen	Post Office Workers	1921–7	
J Bromley	Locomotive Engineers & Firemen	1921–35	DNB; DLB; Clegg
A Conley	Tailor & Garment Workers	1921–48	
J Davenport	General Labourers	1921, 1924–33	
H H Elvin	Clerks	1925–39	DLB
A Findlay	Patternmakers	1921–40	
A Hayday	General & Municipal Workers	1922–36	ODNB; Clegg
G Hicks	Building Trade Workers	1921–40	DLB; Clegg
J Hill	Boilermakers	1906–35	DNB; DLB; Clegg
R T Jones	North Wales Quarrymen	1921–32	DNB
W Kean	Gold, Silver & Allied Trades	1921–45	
J R Leslie	Shop Assistants	1925	
J W Ogden	Amalgamated Weavers	1911–29	Clegg
E L Poulton	Boot & Shoe Operatives	1917–29	Clegg
A Pugh	Iron & Steel Trades	1920–35	DNB; Clegg
A A Purcell	Furnishing Trades	1919–27	DNB; DLB; Clegg; Morgan 2013



(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)
M Quaile	Transport & General Workers	1923–5	
T Richards	Miners	1925–31	DLB
J Rowan	Electrical Trades	1921–34	
H Skinner	Typographical Association	1915, 1917– 20, 1921–31	
R Smillie	Miners	1917, 1920–6	DNB; DLB; NRA (2); Clegg; autobiography 1924
A B Swales	Engineers	1919–34	Clegg
J H Thomas	Railwaymen	1917– 23, 1925–8	DNB; NRA (11); Clegg; autobiography 1937; Blaxland 1964
W Thorne	General & Municipal Workers	1894– 1933	DNB; DLB; NRA (3); Clegg; autobiography 1925
B Tillett	Transport & General Workers	1892–4, 1921–31	DNB; DLB; NRA (11); Clegg; autobiography 1931; Schneer 1982
B Turner	Textile Workers	1921–8	DNB; DLB; NRA (5); Clegg; autobiography 1930
A G Walkden	Railway Clerks	1921–35	DNB; DLB
R B Walker	Agricultural Workers	1917–27	Clegg

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