

Climbing Mount Sinai

Noah Ablett 1883-1935

Robert Turnbull



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Front cover illustration: Tonypandy Miners, 1910

Contents

Foreword and Acknowledgements.....	2
Introduction.....	5
Black Gold in the Hills - The Rhondda Valley 1883-1907.....	12
Autodidacts for Revolution.....	20
The Kerr Company of Chicago.....	20
Seekers after Truth.....	25
The Formation of the Plebs League and the 1909 Ruskin Strike.....	25
2 August 1909 and the opening of the CLC.....	32
A Bonfire on a Welsh Hillside.....	36
The Cambrian Combine Strike and <i>The Miners' Next Step</i>	36
The Miners' Next Step.....	41
A False Utopia.....	43
First World War and the Russian Revolution.....	43
Passing the Door to which there is No Key.....	50
Noah Ablett's Final Years 1921-1935.....	50
The Sankey Commission, The Triple Alliance and 1926.....	55
Conclusion.....	59
Further Reading.....	62

For Eric Turnbull 1932-2017

Foreword and Acknowledgements

Noah Ablett 1883-1935 has been described as the *ultimate organic intellectual*. An accomplished autodidact, scholar, polemicist, orator and teacher; he was one of the most outstanding, but controversial characters to emerge from the period of unprecedented industrial, political and social turmoil which came to convulse the South Wales coalfield in the years preceding the outbreak of the First World War.

His descent into alcoholism and tragic death from cancer at only 52 years of age robbed the labour and trade union movement of one of its most influential and charismatic leaders at a time when he should have been at the peak of his powers and when his influence should have been most keenly felt. Indeed such was Ablett's reputation among his contemporaries that Will Lawther, a pupil of Ablett's at the Central Labour College, and later to be a major figure in the North East Labour College movement, described him as "*The greatest pre-war Marxist*".

After beginning his working life in the Rhondda valley where the 1901 census records his occupation as a coal hewer, he was fortunate in 1907 to attend Ruskin College Oxford on a correspondence course scholarship, and subsequently on a scholarship from the Rhondda no. 1 district of the South Wales Miners Federation (The Fed).

While at Ruskin, Ablett came under the influence of the American Marxist Daniel de Leon, 1852-1914, who argued that the way to defeat capitalism was through workers forming one big industrial union, in place of the hundreds of small unions which existed at the time. The hope was that by forming an industrial union workers would be able to take power for themselves without the need for labour leaders or labour representation in Parliament, which Ablett and others increasingly saw as representing only the interests of the capitalist class.



Members of the South Wales Federation of Miners at
Ruskin 1908

This growing belief in the power of the industrial union movement ran parallel with Ablett's growing belief that Ruskin was not providing the sort of education that was needed if the working class were to become masters of their own destiny.

As a result in October 1908, Ablett and other students formed what became known as the League of the Plebs, and later the Plebs League, to argue for Independent Working Class Education or IWCE. Its aim as defined by Ablett who had taken the chair at the Oxford conference of 1908, when the first branch of the Plebs League had been formed, was the advocacy of IWCE with the theory of the class war as the underlying principle of instruction.

Following his return to South Wales in 1909, Ablett became checkweighman at Mardy colliery, as well as chairman of the newly formed South Wales wing of the Plebs League, formed in Tonypany in January 1909. For the next nine years, the Rhondda would be Noah Ablett's main base of operations, until he left the Rhondda in 1918 to become miners' agent at Merthyr.

As well as being a miner, Ablett was also part author of the famous syndicalist pamphlet *The Miners' Next Step*, a member of the executive committee of the SWMF from January 1911, as well as the executive committee of the MFGB between 1921 and 1926. He was also chairman of the board of governors of the CLC until 1926.

Sadly it was that unbending all-consuming commitment to a utopian vision where the working class would become their own masters without need for labour leaders, which was ultimately to be his undoing. Unable to resign himself to a post-war world in which the tides of revolution had ebbed, and facing a counterrevolution by an emboldened capitalist class, he increasingly sought solace in the bottle, with the result that he became a liability to those who had once sought his guidance, but despite this he continued to be held in high esteem by all who had had the pleasure of his company, as Jim Griffiths recalls in a poignant and moving obituary.

Subsequently I came to know Ablett intimately in the miners' movement, and to know Noah was to make a friend - the most loyal colleague anyone could have. He had a marvellous penetrative mind. He could see straight to the heart of a problem... and when the day's work was done, when the heat of controversy was over, what a comrade he could be. How he loved to quote his Omar and his Shakespeare. I can hear him now with Omar crying.

*Ah love could you and I with fate conspire,
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire
Would we not shatter it to bits?
And then remould it nearer to the heart's desire*

Noah Ablett has fascinated me for many years and I must thank all of those people who have helped in the writing and research for this book.

I must begin by acknowledging the huge debt that I owe to Noah Ablett's family. Without their help, it is unlikely I would have managed to finish this project, so my special thanks to Stephanie, John, Helena and Gareth, for the original copies of Noah's Ruskin essays from 1907, and for the ceremonial scroll presented to Noah in 1918 when he left the Rhondda for Merthyr. I must thank especially Sian Williams at the South Wales Miners Library in Swansea for putting me in touch with the Ablett family.

The initial idea for a book on Noah Ablett was conceived over a decade ago and grew out of my long standing interest in the history and philosophy of autodidacticism and IWCE. The problem was finding somebody that was prepared to see the project through to completion, so a big thank you to David Morgan and the Socialist History Society for agreeing to take the project on and for seeing it through to completion.

I must also thank the following. The staff at the Working Class Movement Library, Salford, Newcastle upon Tyne City Library, The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, for the digitised copies of the *Rhondda Leader* and the *Merthyr Pioneer*, and for the use of the WH Mainwaring papers on the Cambrian Combine strike of 1910. I would also like to thank the staff at Hexham library, Northumberland for sourcing me important books on the history of the Rhondda and in particular Noah Ablett's only surviving fragment of autobiography.

I would particularly like to thank the following: Jo Waller, Rhian Philips, Alex Dunedin, Dr Hywel Francis, Jaselle Williams, Dr Richard Lewis, Dave Tate, James King, Colin Waugh, Keith Venables and all the various members of the IWCEN, Ramsay at PM Press, Professor Ralph Darlington, Ben Sellers, Chrissy Jordan, the staff at Word Power Books, Edinburgh, Professor David Egan, and Steve Thompson, editor at *Llafur*.

My special thanks as always to my family, to my mother and late father, Audrey and Eric Turnbull; my wife, Kim, and our three sons Adam, Jake and Christopher, who have handled my obsession with Noah Ablett with their usual customary tolerance and patience. For all their help and support this book is dedicated to them.

Introduction

At the beginning of August 2014, I had the pleasure of attending a Ruskin College reunion. It was while browsing the paintings on the wall of the boardroom that I came across the imposing figure of Ruskin's most famous or depending on your point of view, infamous, principal.

On the wall before me stood the painting of Dennis Hurd, principal of Ruskin's bitter rival the Central Labour College, or CLC, from 1909 until his death in 1920, during an era which would shake the labour movement to its very foundations, and cause a split on the left, which has never been resolved, between people who advocate an expanded role for the state in education, and those who would like to see the state's influence in educational policy curtailed. It is one of history's great ironies that both the libertarian right and the radical syndicalist left, as represented in this study, wish to reduce the role of the state in education, albeit for fundamentally different reasons.

Dennis Hurd's tenure in charge of the CLC took place during an epoch-defining episode in labour history, namely the formation of the Plebs League in October 1908, and subsequently during the infamous 1909 strike, when a group of students who had become increasingly disillusioned with Ruskin's liberal WEA influenced curriculum, walked out of Ruskin, and set up their own labour college, first in Oxford itself, and later until its closure in 1929 at Earl's Court in central London.

Hurd's is a dominant striking image, the bearded figure of an Edwardian patriarch, gazing down from the wall in a college, which has been part of labour movement history for over a century, and which during that time, has produced some of the most innovative historical scholarship of the post war era, such as the History Workshop Movement, under the guidance of the late Raphael Samuel and others.

During that time Ruskin has had its ups and downs, its heroes and its villains, none more so than recently, with the senseless academic vandalism that was the destruction of the Ruskin Archive, and yet somehow its students live on, both in collective memory, and in the fields of politics and academia. Many Ruskin students have vanished into the mists of time, but occasionally there are ex-students whose reputation and achievements are worthy of a wider audience.

One of these surely has to be that of the Welsh autodidact and trade union leader Noah Ablett, 1883-1935. To his fellow Welshman Aneurin Bevan, he was, “*A leader of great intellectual power and immense influence*”.¹ Hywel Francis writes that, “*He was the greatest organic intellectual to emerge from the South Wales coalfield and his thinking shaped a generation of miner activists*”.² An equally positive judgment is given by historian Kenneth Morgan who writes, “*He was the most important ideologue produced by Wales generally in the Edwardian period*”.³

So just who was Noah Ablett? Just what was it that made Ablett unique, and where does he stand in the great tradition of firebrand revolutionary Welsh leaders, the great autodidactic league exemplified by Arthur Horner, Nye Bevan and Arthur Cook? Is it possible that Ablett was a kind of latter day secular Moses ascending Mount Sinai, and what, if any, is his legacy today?

Noah Ablett was born at Ynys-hir in the Rhondda Fach, on 4 October 1883. He was the tenth child of eleven to John Ablett and his wife Jane, née Williams and the community into which he was born, and to which he dedicated his life, would produce some of the most outstanding, but also controversial, labour and trade union leaders of the 20th century: men such as Arthur Cook, Will John Edwards, and Arthur Horner, would become known throughout the South Wales coalfield and beyond for their passionate commitment to the communities they were elected to serve.

Sadly in the case of Noah Ablett, it was that commitment to the community, and the almost intolerable pressures that this placed upon him, allied to a determination to light the blue touch paper of class war irrespective of the consequences to himself or those around him that ultimately led to his descent from the mountain.

His premature passing was an irredeemable loss to the labour movement in South Wales, and I contend that we still live with the consequences today. There is no way of knowing what Ablett would have achieved had he not succumbed to terminal illness and the bottle, but it is hard to believe he could have sat on the sidelines during the late 1930s as the threat of fascism grew even more menacing.

1 Egan D, *Noah Ablett 1883-1935. Llafur*, Vol 4 No 3, p.19.

2 Francis H, *Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004
[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/47319>]

3 Egan D, *op cit*, p.19.

So clearly Noah Ablett's reputation rests on many facets, not least of which was his co-authorship of the famous syndicalist pamphlet, *The Miners' Next Step* in 1912, a publication which was to bring Ablett to regional prominence within the tightly knit confines of the South Wales coalfield as an uncompromising fighter in the class war, against the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coal Owners Association, but also his own union, where he and others, increasingly found themselves at odds with not only the moderate leadership of the SWMF, under William Abraham (Mabon), but also the Parliamentary Labour Party, whose reverence for Parliament and the institutions of the state, Ablett was to mock in biting invective as, "*Hot air in a gas house on the way to becoming a dung heap*"⁴ and perhaps in one of the clearest statements of his beliefs that, "*The Industrial union did not need the backing of a political organization; therefore it was foolish to swim the river to fill the bucket on the other side*".⁵

Ablett's rejection of the parliamentary road to socialism as an ideological dead-end, was based on his belief that the tools for leading working people to the New Jerusalem, were there in their own hands, in their own communities, in the magnificent lending libraries, for example, which dominated the South Wales coalfield at the time, and that emancipation was possible, if only working people could grasp the opportunity without waiting for the leaders of labour to take them to the promised land, as Marx and Engels had argued when they stated that the emancipation of the working class must be carried out by the working class themselves.⁶

So what were the tools that would be used in this great struggle for emancipation? The answer for Noah Ablett, Noah Rees, Charlie Gibbons, Will Mainwaring and others, was to be found within working people's daily experiences, within the class struggle as they fought the coal owners of South Wales, against the callous indifference described in John Brown's account of the Senghenydd mining disaster, *Valley of the Shadow*, which details the terrible events in 1901 and 1913, and which to this day remains the worst mining disaster in British history.⁷

Of equal importance was the desire for educational enlightenment outlined in the first edition of the journal, *Plebs*, which articulated the growing frustration of a

4 *The Merthyr Pioneer*, 10 November 1917, p.3.

5 *Ibid*, p.19.

6 Marx K & Engels F, *The German Ideology*, Ed Arthur C, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1970, p.123.

7 See for example: Brown H, *Valley of the Shadow*, Alun Books, Port Talbot, 1981, esp. Chapter 10, 'Men came cheap', pp.125-137.

new generation of militants who had no time for the moderate consensus politics as argued for by either the ILP or the SWMF:

Enter the '*Plebs*', not from above but from below, not to fight a sham battle among the shadows by the orders and for the interests of our masters, but to fight a real battle in the full light and with a clear knowledge of the issue before us. To make clear the real position of Ruskin College, to point out its present weaknesses, to outline its possibilities, to demonstrate its value to the Labour Movement if definitely founded thereon, to stimulate active interest in working-class education and to open out propaganda of an educational character from the working-class point of view.⁸

George Sims, one of the original founders of the Plebs League, and a contemporary of Noah Ablett, summed up what the new movement was about. Plebs reported that:

Mr Sims, of Ruskin College, in a short and breezy speech, explained that the object of the Plebs League was to bring about a definite and more satisfactory connection between Ruskin College and the Labour Movement. He said in order to promote those interests, it was essential that the teaching the worker received should be in harmony with such interests, and that it should not require that mental condition known as the open mind, which often betokened an empty mind. It was necessary that the control of their institution should be ultimately in the hands of the workers. Their mandate was 'the education of the workers in the interests of the workers'.⁹

So enlightenment for Noah Ablett and others was not found in the hallowed halls of Westminster, or the dreaming spires of Oxford for that matter. For Ablett and his supporters, enlightenment for the working class was firmly rooted in the materialist conception of history, at that point in the division of labour where a small number of people begin living from the toil of others. This is the basis of the class struggle, and to the end of his life, it would form the core of Ablett's outlook.

Running parallel to the materialist conception of history was the notion that education should serve not only as a tool for understanding social forces, but also as a means of carrying out revolution. The founders of the Plebs League argued that education must reflect this reality; otherwise it will be no more than a mirror

8 *Plebs*, February, 1909, p.1. For an account of the growing gulf between Mabon and the rank and file Robin Page Arnot is indispensable. Page Arnot R, *Glowyr de Cymru. A History of the South Wales Miners Federation 1898-1914*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1967, p.177. The growing militancy and frustration of the militants was voiced by Will Mainwaring who suggested in reply to Mabon's plea at the beginning of the Cambrian Combine Strike of 1910, that they call off the strike "Mr D A Thomas may be your friend Mr Abraham. He is not our friend". For a good introduction to Mabon see Evans E W, *Mabon. A Study in Trade Union Leadership*, University of Wales Press, 1959.

9 *Plebs*, op cit, p.3.

image of the education currently provided by the capitalist class and organisations such as the WEA, which were long suspected by the IWCE movement of being “*capitalist lackeys*”.¹⁰ In an increasingly acrimonious war of words between the WEA and the IWCE movement, the Plebs League argued:

Labour must achieve its own liberty. Liberty cannot be superimposed from above. It cannot be presented as a gift from an economically superior class..... It must be self-accomplished. Class interests and class education are inseparable.¹¹

Sadly the cost of achieving that liberty, and the mental and physical toll that this took on Noah Ablett’s health, is detailed by David Egan who in a lecture for *Llafur* to mark the anniversary of Ablett’s death outlined his remarkable achievements, but also his long battle with alcohol:

Much of what we know about Ablett relies on the chimera of a reputation which now focused on the didactic progenitor of *The Miners’ Next Step*, then is drawn to the vision of the brilliant inspirer of the Central Labour College, but too often returns inescapably to the view of the broken and shamed alcoholic.¹²

In one sense David Egan is right, and as a result Ablett’s failings, primarily his alcoholism, have dictated the shape of this book. Unlike his contemporary and protégé Arthur Horner, who rose to become President of the Fed from 1936 onwards, and after the war, General Secretary of the NUM, Ablett never achieved national prominence and it is this, combined with the absence of any personal correspondence, which has prevented a full scale study of Ablett’s life.

In light of this lack of source material I have included a short chapter which covers the remaining years of Ablett’s life from 1918 onwards and details as far as is possible his role in events such as the Hands off Russia campaign, the controversy surrounding the Sankey Commission and the General Strike, when he was arrested for sedition. I have made extensive use of the Home Office Directorate of Intelligence papers which are available through the National Archive in the later stages of the book. I hope readers will appreciate the restrictions that this has placed on the research.

In this study I am seeking to rescue one of the most important figures in Welsh

10 Lewis R, *Leaders and Teachers. Adult Education and the challenge of Labour in South Wales 1906-1940*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1993, p.183.

11 Plebs League, *The Burning Question of Education*, pp.20-21.

12 Egan D, *op cit*, p.19.

labour history from what E P Thompson famously referred to as the condescension of posterity, and to remind current and future generations who may be unaware of the titanic struggles our forebears faced, how we have got to where we are, and what we may achieve in the future.¹³

Secondly, at a time when working people are facing some of the biggest challenges they have ever confronted, in terms of health, housing, employment and education, what can Noah Ablett and the philosophy he espoused teach us about the methods needed to combat this neo-liberal onslaught? Is there anything we can learn from his life and career that can assist us in our contemporary struggles?

Despite all his faults and failings, Ablett cut a swathe through the intellectual, cultural and political life of South Wales, for an all too brief period, but he surely deserves to be remembered as a figure of immense stature whose ideas and influence were responsible for moulding a generation of working class activists.

For too long he has remained a distant figure from a bygone age, occasionally lectured about, and sometimes written about in the pages of academic journals such as *Llafur*, but increasingly a figure for whom contemporary labour seems to find little time or relevance.

Today organised labour lacks its organic intellectuals of the stature of Ablett, neither does it have outstanding leaders in the shape of a Nye Bevan or a Tony Benn, so it is up to us to organise ourselves in much the same way that Noah Ablett argued. We can expect no favours from our elected representatives who have become increasingly remote from the people they are elected to serve.

It is clear that we must have a framework, a means of articulating in Ablett's phrase, "*What We Want and Why?*", and that framework surely has to begin with education, in much the same way that Ablett envisaged it, and for which he argued with so much passion throughout his all too brief life.¹⁴

Jim Griffiths, later to become President of the Fed, recalled the first time he heard Noah Ablett speaking in Swansea in 1910:

When I heard of the passing of Noah Ablett, my mind was transported back

¹³ Thompson E P, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, p.12.

¹⁴ Snowden E, Thomas J H, Williams R, *What We Want and Why*, Kessinger Publishing, USA, 2009. This book was originally published in 1922 and contains chapters by Tom Mann, J Bromley and Ablett himself who contributed a chapter. The book laid out the post-war demands of the labour movement and how they might be achieved.

to 1910. I was in a smoky room full of young enthusiasts at Swansea. On the platform stood this new figure, this young visionary with a new gospel. With a quiet voice, full of persuasiveness, and with eyes a glitter with his mission, he proclaimed the need for independence in education. The workers had been compiled to build independent trade union. They had been complied to build an independent political party. The need was now urgent to build an independent movement for working class education. Who would provide that education? The state? The Capitalists? No the workers must provide it for themselves.¹⁵

I would like to end with a further quote by Griffiths who wrote that, “*Ablett passed the door to which there is no key, but that Noah Ablett lives and will live. He lives in the NCLC, in our Miners Federation and in the hearts and minds of all who were privileged to enjoy his friendship*”.¹⁶ It is within this framework of striving for a better world for humankind that I hope people reading this book will be inspired to take up the fight which Noah Ablett left us.

¹⁵ Noah Ablett Obituary, *Plebs*, 1935, Vol 28 No 12, p.296.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.296.

CHAPTER 1

Black Gold in the Hills - The Rhondda Valley 1883-1907

In his history of the South Wales Miners (Glowyr de Cymru) Robin Page Arnot writes that, *"The last three years of the 19 c when the South Wales Miners Federation came fully into being marked the close of the Victorian epoch. Indeed for the Princess Victoria in her childhood travel was hardly swifter than it had been seventeen hundred years earlier when the Roman Emperor Hadrian journeyed from York to the Mediterranean. By the time of her death in 1901, Victoria Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, Empress of India, the figure who along with Gladstone, Disraeli and Dickens had come to symbolise the age, had experienced some of the most dramatic and far reaching developments the world had ever seen. From being at the outset of the 19th century a predominantly feudal, agrarian society, Britain was transformed into the world's first industrial powerhouse"*.¹⁷

In the vanguard of this development were the massive steam coal reserves of the South Wales coalfield.



This coalfield, which ran broadly from Pontypool near the English border in the East, over towards the anthracite district of Swansea and Llanelli in the West,

¹⁷ Arnot, R P, *South Wales Miners Glowyr de Cymru. A History of the South Wales Miners Federation 1898-1914*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1967, p.23.

and south into the Cynon, Rhymney, and Rhondda valleys, had been created during the Upper Carboniferous period some 300 to 315 million years earlier, and as more and more deep pits were sunk, the dangers posed by the geology of the area became more apparent. The difficult geological conditions of the Rhondda valley in particular would come to define not just the geology of the area, but increasingly its political, social, cultural and economic fabric as we shall see.

Noah Ablett himself gives a particularly graphic account of the dangers that he and others faced,

The hewer down in the mine, away from the sunlight and fresh air, sometimes in a temperature of up to 90°F, every movement of the day inhaling coal and shale dust, perspiring so abnormally (unusually as few men in other industries can realise), head throbbing with the almost inhuman exertion (effort), the roof perhaps 18 inches low, perhaps 20 feet high, ears constantly strained for movements in the strata on which his limbs or his life is dependent, breathing always noxious (harmful smells) due to the absence of any kind of sanitation and to gases..... subject at any moment to the terrible list of mining diseases, most common of which is the dreaded nystagmus, which if neglected can lead to insanity. Liable always to wounds and death from falls of roof..... And ever and over all the sickening dread of the awful explosion. Such a man is entitled to our sympathy and respect, but what he frequently gets is abuse.¹⁸

It was an entirely different prospect in 1847 when Charles Fredrick Cliffe visited the Rhondda valley. He described it in the following glowing terms,

The valley stretched for a distance of eight or ten miles between two nearly parallel lines of hill, broken by a succession of cliffs of singular beauty.... The emerald greenness of the meadows in the valleys was most refreshing. The air is aromatic (sweet smelling) with the wild flowers and mountain plants. A Sabbath stillness reigns. It is the gem of Glamorganshire.¹⁹

Some 60 years later Arthur Morris visited the same area of the Rhondda. This is how he described it and the contrast could not be starker,

The river Rhondda is a dark, turgid and contaminated gutter into which is poured the refuse of the host of collieries which skirt the 13 miles of its course. The hills have been stripped of all of their woodland beauty and there they stand, rugged and bare with immense rubbish heaps covering their

18 Ablett N, Snowden E, Thomas J H, Williams R, Mann T, Bromley J, *What We Want and Why?* W Collins and Sons and Co. London, 1922, p.142.

19 Egan D, *Coal Society: A History of the South Wales Mining Valleys 1840-1980*, Gomer Press Llandysul, Dyfed, 1987, p.3.

surface.

The whole length of the valley has become transformed... The din of steam engines, the whirr of machinery, the grating sound of coal screens and the hammering of the smithies proceed increasingly night and day, year in and year out. An unheard of wealth of industry and a great population have simultaneously sprung up together during the last 60 years... The industrial townships of the valley appear to be inseparably connected in one continuous series of streets of workmen's cottages to Pontypridd.²⁰

Finally, David Smith gives an account of the Rhondda as Ablett would have known it during his childhood,

Effluence poured into the river from works and houses, so that in the summer, the high rich smell of decayed matter and slaughtered meat was pungent indeed. Nevertheless the prevailing grimness of the environment was countered in turn by the very social capital which had brought it into forced being. Here a whirligig of sounds, smells and sights caught up a population barely a generation (and often not that) away from the land. Packaged foods and ready made goods were consumer luxuries that made shops seductive enticers to debt as well as welcome centres of social intercourse.²¹

This then was the environment that nurtured Noah Ablett and thousands like him. It was an area which had seen massive population growth after 1890 as more and more pits were sunk with the result that labour was plentiful, but accidents, death and disease were all too common; an environment tempered by the demands of self-help, thrift, respectability and a population which grew 34% between 1901 and 1911 from 113,735 to 152,781 by 1911.²²

At his birth nobody could have predicted how Noah Ablett's life would unfold. There is nothing in his early life to suggest his fortunes would be any different from that of any number of working class kids in the Rhondda valley, in the cotton mills of Lancashire, in the shipyards of Govan in Glasgow, or of Swan Hunter up on the Tyne.

His early life followed a well-worn trajectory. After a basic education at Ferndale Higher Grade School, Noah Ablett began work at the Standard Colliery

²⁰ Ibid, p.4.

²¹ Smith D, *Tonypany 1910: Definitions of Community, Past and Present*, Number 87 May 1980, p.172. The death rate among miners from what Smith refers to as pulmonary consumption was 11 times higher at this time than for any other occupation. Equally shocking are the death rates for pit accidents. In 1905 33 men and boys died in an explosion at the Cambrian Colliery in Clydach Vale. Two months later 119 miners were killed not five miles down the valley at Wattstown.

²² Ibid, p.171.

Ynys-hir, aged just 12 years old, in 1895. If fate had not intervened, it is fair to assume that he would have been just another ordinary Welsh miner, leading an unremarkable life, but Ablett was possessed of a gift for learning and a desire for self-improvement which mirrored the values of the nonconformist chapel-going society in which he had been raised.



Ynys-hir, Standard Coal Mine 1904

In his only published fragment of autobiography Ablett's frustration is palpable,

I was doing very well and had great hopes of passing my examination. In order to make success more certain, I had saved enough money to keep me three months at a college. However before going to the college I consulted a doctor. To my dismay the doctor advised me not to go to college. I had a compound fracture of the leg (caused by a four ton piece of coal landing on his leg), two broken fingers and a small growth in the nostrils, and this he assured me would prevent me being allowed to enter the civil service..... I felt like a trapped animal..... The idea of escaping the dangers and hard work of mining became ever more fixed in my mind.²³

Ablett along with Nye Bevan illustrates this autodidactic desire for knowledge and mutual improvement through the medium of education, and religious observance, something which is fundamental to understanding Noah Ablett's development, for as he says himself,

It is the ambition of every large working class family in Wales to set aside

²³ *What We Want and Why*, op cit, p.136.

one member of the family to be a preacher, at least in Non-Conformist families, and early on I was given to understand that my destiny was to be a preacher. As a boy of 12, I did preach in some of the chapels of my native locality, but by 15 had left the chapel.²⁴

In the same vein, Bevan writes of his native Tredegar and the fusion that was nonconformity, radical politics, and an almost messianic belief in the power of education,

There is no town in South Wales which can hold a candle to Tredegar for its library and institute. More money is spent on books here than anywhere else in Wales, but two elements have grown up in the train of the industrialisation of the valleys which are responsible more than anything else for moulding the character of the South Wales Miners, and these are the chapels, which cultivated the gift of expression, and the lending libraries which provided the reading facilities.²⁵

This fusion of nonconformity, self-help and a seemingly endless supply of books, magazines and pamphlets on which to broaden one's horizon, are what more than anything else facilitated Noah Ablett's intellectual and political development. Just to take one example; in *Do Miners Read Dickens*, the authors state that in 1913, Cymner library in the Rhondda, could boast over 7,000 books with an increasing Marxist emphasis, which is apparent in titles such as Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, and *Essays in Socialism* by Belfort Bax.²⁶

Given these influences, it is hardly surprising that by the early years of the twentieth century, Noah Ablett was increasingly to distance himself from the chapel environment, and move towards the revolutionary, uncompromising syndicalism which came to define his career. What did this mean in practice?

In practice, it meant support for the ideals of the Plebs League and the meant class war on a national scale, not just in South Wales. This declaration meant no compromise with the capitalist class, no co-operation with their institutions, such as Ruskin College and the WEA, the class war was to be carried out in the South Wales valleys, in the industrial North East, in Clydeside and in a thousand other work places the length and breadth of the British Isles, with the aim of winning the

24 Ibid. For a very good description of the growth of nonconformity in the Rhondda see E D Lewis, *The Rhondda Valleys*, Phoenix House, London, 1959, esp. pp.29-30, pp.218-21, pp.219 and pp.222-3.

25 Francis H & Williams S, *Do Miners Read Dickens? Origins and Progress of the South Wales Miners Library 1973-2013*, Parthian Books, Cardigan, 2013, p.14.

26 Ibid, p.18.

working class over to socialism.

But here the focus will be on South Wales, because it was here in the difficult geological conditions of this area, in places such as the Rhondda Fach and the Rhondda Fawr in the tightly knit working class communities of places such as Treorchy, Tonypany and Sengenyedd, that the weapon of what became known as “Independent Working Class Education” or IWCE was forged.

In these communities, IWCE became in effect a means of emancipation from what seems to us in a much more pampered age, an unbelievably brutal struggle for existence let alone survival. The conditions in which the South Wales miners were working were vividly described by Ablett’s fellow student at Ruskin, Will John Edwards,

I was now in darkness, darkness, complete and absolute and in a narrow tunnel alone. As I lay on the ground, I heard water trickling from somewhere..... The steel hawser began whirring faster and faster through the darkness.... Soon I could hear the trams rumbling nearer, until at last there was a mighty roar as the train rushed down on me, it seemed in a gale of dust and rushing air.²⁷

So the influences that made Noah Ablett and his compatriots were many and varied. I want to suggest that it was not just the massive growth in the coal industry that defined his development, but that there were also a number of other competing factors.

For instance how far was Ablett’s philosophy shaped in opposition not only to the philosophy of the coal owners but also to the "respectable" opinion of the valleys such as religious belief? Respectable opinion relates not only to the middle class outlook but also to what was considered to be respectable within the mining communities themselves. After all not all miners were syndicalist and not all would be socialists.

I would also see the development of opposition from within the union itself, in the shape of young and maybe not so young activists, who acted as an opposition to the union bureaucracy as personified by William Abraham. As Ablett puts it,

The educationalist, the journalist and all other hired hacks of capitalism saw to it that the working class was diverted from the things that really mattered by indulging in useless political squabbles, and by a bogus political equality.

27 Edwards W J, *From the Valley I Came*, Angus and Robertson, London, 1956, p.53-54.

The people who hoped to elect a majority of working class political representatives were chasing a shadow. Politics and parliament were essentially capitalist.²⁸

I would argue that syndicalism is also a rebellion against the union machine which many saw as corrupted by arbitration, instead of taking direct action. Also, we should ask, how influential were De Leon's writings in shaping Ablett's outlook? Daniel de Leon was an American Marxist, whose speaking tour in Britain during 1904 was to be a huge influence not only on Noah Ablett, but also on a whole generation of socialist activists.

Also of fundamental importance in Ablett's political development was the radical publisher Charles Kerr of Chicago, who in the early 1900s began exporting large amounts of socialist literature to the UK, which meant that for the first time, people had access to socialist texts on a large scale. Workers now had the access to theory to run alongside the practical daily tasks of labour and trade union agitation.

It is impossible though to separate Ablett and the coal mining industry. The great Victorian entrepreneurs such as Brunel, Stephenson and in Wales W T Lewis, or as he later became Lord Merthyr, could not get enough of it. Coal was needed to run the railways, to run the factories and to power the steamships such as Brunel's Great Eastern. Coal and steam power made possible the expansion of the British Raj and facilitated trade and commerce on a scale never previously seen.

Nowhere was this demand for coal more exemplified than in the valleys of South Wales. In 1865 total coal production was some 12,656,336 tonnes. The figures just seem to rise inexorably, until on the eve of the First World War, South Wales was producing a staggering 56,830,720 tonnes of coal per year and 19.7% of all the coal produced in the UK.²⁹

The eclipse of Mabon as a credible leader increasingly paralleled that of the Liberal Party itself, whose stress on social harmony and class co-operation was anathema to the new generation of miners' leaders, who would have nothing to do with a philosophy which they saw as benefiting only their enemies, the coal owners. The near messianic belief in the inevitability of a new social order, is

28 *The Merthyr Pioneer*, 10 November 1917, p.3. For the background to syndicalism and *The Miners' Next Step*, see Bob Pitt, *Syndicalism in South Wales: The Origins of The Miners' Next Step*. I accessed this journal through www.whatnextjournal.co.uk

29 Egan Coal Society, *A History of the South Wales Mining Valleys 1840-1980*, Gomer Press Llandysul, Dyfed, 1987, p.13.

starkly illustrated by the following report which appeared in the *Rhondda Leader*, in which a Miss Daisy Hailing, a retired actress, outlined the principles of socialism and how they could be achieved,

After depicting most vividly the sufferings and misery of the people of the slums of London and Manchester, Miss Hailing contrasted it with the pleasant and luxurious lives of the wealthy classes. That this would not exist under socialism was the all-important theme advocated.... Travelling up and down the country she learned the all important lesson, never taught to children at school, that while the land and the means of production are owned and controlled by a few, and that for a profit, wage earners must be wage slaves. She wanted people to realise that it is no use to vex or feel sorry that oppression, hunger and injustice exists, it is necessary to raise an active voice in protest... It had been prophesied some years ago that the bonfires of socialism would be lighted on the Welsh mountains soon, and she was happy to feel that this prophecy was being realised today.³⁰

If the bonfire of socialism was really to be lit on a Welsh mountain, then it would need a ready available supply of fuel and a plentiful supply of oxygen. It is one of the great historical ironies that one of the main sources of fuel for Noah Ablett's intellectual development, came not from the relative backwater of the Rhondda Fach, but via an ex-pat Scot from Aberdeen, whose parents had emigrated to Quebec in 1835, and following the upheaval of the American Civil War, had finally settled in Rockford, Illinois. The name of the family was Kerr and they would go on to be one of the cornerstones of Ablett's emergence as one of the outstanding autodidacts of his era. It is to the Kerr family that we can now turn.

30 *The Rhondda Leader*, 29 August 1908, p.3, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

CHAPTER 2

Autodidacts for Revolution

The Kerr Company of Chicago

Alexander and Kate Kerr, the parents of Charles Kerr, were abolitionists, and as Allen Ruff explains in his history of the Kerr Company, *We Called Each Other Comrade*, “His early environment was certainly a key factor and Kerr's parents also played an important role. The moral and social perspectives and the dedication to service of both Alexander and Katherine Kerr had an inestimable effect on their son”.³¹ By the early years of the 20th century, Charles Kerr had become part of the radical socialist wing of the American labour movement whose influence was beginning to spread far beyond that of his native Chicago.

The Kerr Company of Chicago had been formed in 1866 as a publisher of Unitarian tracts, its origins a barometer of the many religious groupings which came to define the USA in the wake of mass immigration from Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. By the turn of the century with the conversion of Charles H Kerr to the radical socialist cause, the company's focus began to shift, and it is indicative of not only its growth, but also its growing international influence that by 1903 the company was able to begin exporting large amounts of socialist literature to Britain.

As Charles Kerr himself observed, “*There could be no educated socialists without socialist books*”³² and it is this perhaps more than anything else, apart from the influence of the chapel, that was to contribute to Noah Ablett's intellectual development. At a time when the cost of going to Ruskin College was £52 per year, and the average weekly wage no more than a few shillings per week, the ability to read left wing texts in a cheap, readily accessible form, had a massive influence on the ideas of the generation of left wing militant activists, who now had the theoretical knowledge to complement their daily struggles against the coal owners of South Wales and Monmouthshire.

They were not short of reading material. The history of the Tredegar Workmen's Hall notes that in 1904 the first published catalogue of books in the library ran to 45 pages alone, and this was increasingly reflected across the mining

31 Ruff A, *We Called Each Other Comrade*, Charles H Kerr & Company Radical Publishers, PM Press, Oakland California, 2011, p.1.

32 Ibid, p.99. See also my *Left for the Rising Sun. Right for Swan Hunter. The Plebs League in the North East of England 1908-1926*, Five Leaves Publications, Nottingham, 2014, p.63.

communities of South Wales.³³

If Ablett's physical development took place in the dangerous conditions of the South Wales coalfield then his autodidactic hunger was to be fed not only by the likes of Charles Kerr, but also by the magnificent series of lending libraries which dominated the mining valleys of South Wales at this time.³⁴

Within this environment and central to Ablett's intellectual development was the concept of theoretical education and its relationship to praxis which took on added significance at a time of rising working class consciousness and industrial militancy. As the influence of the chapel waned despite the short-lived religious revival of 1904, education became for many working people not only a means of escape, but a means by which they could best understand the forces ranged against them, and how best they could combat those forces.

Nowhere was this relationship between theory and practice more apparent than in the valleys of South Wales which once had one of the finest collections of reading material to be found among working people anywhere in the world. Dai Smith gives a flavour of the architectural masterpieces that came to define the buildings themselves.

Pedimented doorways, central mullioned windows, the central doorway a real showpiece enriched with terracotta glazed and unglazed. Faced with grey Pennant stone, red brick and white Portland stone, finialed gable ends.³⁵

This distinctive culture which was composed of many disparate elements, nonconformity, radical politics, and the difficult geographical terrain of the coalfield, embodied Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual in its purest form and in an age before the advent of mass literacy, the miners' institutes and their libraries provided a unique resource for the generation of autodidacts, who came to define the coalfield in the first half of the 20th century. Men such as Ablett, Will Mainwaring, Noah Rees and Charlie Gibbons, gained their theoretical knowledge of socialism, and the methods needed to combat the intransigence of the coal owners, through libraries such as Ferndale, Parc Dare and Treorchy.

The lending libraries began in the mid-nineteenth century with the advent of the Mechanics Institutes. Often these were reading rooms and recreational

33 Davies D J, *The Tredegar Workmen's Hall 1861-1951*, place of publication not stated, p.56.

34 Ablett N, Snowden E, Thomas J H, Williams R, Mann T, Bromley J, *What We Want and Why*, Op Cit. p.142.

35 Francis H & Williams S, *Do Miners Read Dickens? Origins and Progress of the South Wales Miners Library 1973-2013*, Parthian, Cardigan, 2013, Foreword VII.

buildings provided by the largesse of wealthy local industrialists, such as Lord Merthyr, or the Marquis of Bute. They were very much in the tradition of the mid-Victorian mindset of self-help and philanthropy. It was hoped that such facilities would keep the workers away from more dangerous pursuits, and create a layer of class compliant autodidacts unwilling to challenge the prevailing social orthodoxy.

As relations between miners and coal owners began to deteriorate, the nature of the miners' institutes and their libraries began to change. In the decades immediately preceding the First World War, they increasingly became an unofficial proletarian university, where the theoretical nature of socialism and syndicalism were argued and debated, within organisations like the ILP, through newspapers such as the *Rhondda Socialist*, and increasingly the Plebs League, and their doctrine of Independent Working Class Education which argued for a workers' education free from capitalist control and influence.

The growing influence of the ILP in the Rhondda is described by Ablett. In a letter to the editor of the *Rhondda Leader* he states,

There are already three branches of the ILP in the Rhondda, and with the energy that characterises this great party, those three branches have already formed a General Purposes Committee which has for its immediate object, the multiplication of those three by at least five in the Rhondda alone. As a result of a meeting of the above Committee, four meetings have been organised at Treorchy and Tonypany.³⁶

It was initially through his emergence as a propagandist for the ILP throughout the South Wales coalfield, and his growing reputation as a leader, that Ablett was firstly able to secure a correspondence course scholarship to Ruskin College in 1907, and a subsequent further scholarship from the Rhondda No 1 District of the South Wales Miners Federation.

The *Rhondda Leader* reported Ablett's departure for Ruskin College with its usual understatement,

At the YGA Rooms on Monday evening 31, a high tea and social took place under the auspices of the Rhondda Independent Labour Party. It was unfortunate that both Mr James Winstone (Miners agent) and Dr Datta (the later gentleman having promised in the absence of the former to preside) were unable to be present, but an excellent substitute was found in Mr T.I Jones F.R.E.S. The occasion was the departure of Mr Noah Ablett for Ruskin

³⁶ *Rhondda Leader*, 2 June 1906, p.3.

College, and members of the various branches turned up in large numbers to give him a hearty send off. The following toasts were given: the Movement in the Rhondda” by Mr Noah Morgan Penygraig “ Success to Mr Noah Ablett” by Mr George Dorling Porth, and leaders of the ILP movement by Mr Jones.³⁷

Ablett’s time at Ruskin would only last two years, but these would be the most important years of his life for it was during this time that along with other members of the college’s Marxian Society, that he would begin to formulate his ideas around the need for independence in education, and to develop not only his writings, but also his platform skills.

Oxford would see the emergence of Noah Ablett not only as a visionary propagandist for the working class, but also the end of his involvement with the ILP, and his adoption of a much more militant form of industrial unionism which stressed the need for the working class to take control of its own destiny.

It was not only in South Wales that this doctrine was beginning to establish itself. In a conference at Chopwell in the North East coalfield, held to debate the merits of industrial unionism, George Harvey, later to be one of the founder members of the Plebs League in the North East and also a contemporary of Ablett at Ruskin, stated,

There was no remedy outside of education and organisation. Leaders and politicians could do nothing. The hope of the working class lay in the working class themselves. They must get down to the root education.³⁸

At the same conference Will Lawther, who despite his later reincarnation as Sir William Lawther, was at this stage an anarcho-syndicalist, suggested the nature of class struggle,

They must recognise it, whether they like it or not that there was going on a class struggle from top to bottom, and the workers must recognise that class struggle going on, and base their organisation upon that class struggle.³⁹

In the view of Ablett and others, the class war had to begin with education since who controlled the educational machinery of the state, ultimately controlled the means of production, and the division of humanity in to social classes. The *Burning Question of Education* was clear that from now on the working class would not accept second best,

³⁷ *Rhondda Leader*, 5 January, 1907, p.5.

³⁸ *The Blaydon Courier*, 19 October 1912, p.8.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.8.

We want neither your crumbs nor your condescension, your guidance nor your glamour, your tuition nor your tradition. We have our own historic way to follow. Our own salvation to achieve and by this sign we shall conquer.⁴⁰

Noah Ablett April 1909

What was Comte's greatest contribution to sociology and state
why you think so --

30/40

In all ages the greatest hindrance to progress has been prejudice. The history of science clearly shows its immense power to paralyze enquiry. The man who has the courage and the power to disarm this monster, and does so, surely deserves universal gratitude. This was the work that Comte attempted and to some extent succeeded in ^{doing} when he appeared on the platform of science, nearly a century ago, he found the scientific world in a state of chaos. For centuries scientific enquiry had been entangled in, and limited by, the narrow, circular, barbed wire fence of theology and metaphysics. The only force that could prevail against these formidable limitations was that negative school of philosophy, the central figure of which was the powerful critic Voltaire. But a negative philosophy could not contain in itself the elements of permanence, and therefore its influence, wherever it could pierce the barriers of prejudice, was merely destructive and lacking in ideals could not point the way to progress, so it tended to either paralysis or reaction. Of this very trying and complicated situation Comte proved himself the master. Possessing a mind eminently practical and wonderfully comprehensive he proceeded to gather all the available knowledge of real things in the order in which they were freed from theological and metaphysical influences, and declared that they represented the sum total of knowledge. From this classification, by generalization he deduced for the first time a science of the universe. For many ages the first gatherers in the scientific field had been engaged in their sectional work without thinking of the connection that existed between all facts. Comte with unexampled vigour showed this connection, and greatest feat of all, demonstrated that man himself was amenable to natural law, and ^{was} therefore an object of scientific enquiry just as much as ^{was} the

An original Ruskin essay by Noah Ablett

CHAPTER 3

Seekers after Truth

The Formation of the Plebs League and the 1909 Ruskin Strike

The first signs that all was not well at Ruskin began to appear during 1907, although from the reports of the time, it is clear that the problems affecting Ruskin had been known about for a while, and more importantly, there had been rumours circulating around the South Wales coalfield, that all was not well. *The Colliery Guardian* reported in October 1908, the deepening concerns among the students at Ruskin as well as the Fed that something was brewing,

Ruskin does not appear to satisfy some of the Federationists in respect of the education it gives to the working miners who resort thither. Students do own housekeeping; devote themselves to the study of economics, of industry, and of questions affecting labour. Rhondda district of miners have a resolution that after the term of the present students is completed, no further grants or donations will be paid out of the district funds for maintenance of future students. It being stated that a rather strong feeling prevailed in some places as to certain of the students holding meetings to expound views prejudicial to the interests of the Federation. The motion was lost at its first proposal, it being decided to seek further information before taking such decisive action, but there is a possibility of another attempt to discredit the institution, especially now that the miners who have had the advantage of studying economics at the Ruskin College have come to the forefront in criticising adversely the decision of their Federation on the subject which was that mining royalties to be the property of the state, and that the Federation executive should prepare a Bill for giving effect to this decision.⁴¹

The 1907 Oxford Report into working class education was merely the preamble to a much wider debate on the left about the nature and purpose of education, a debate which would convulse the labour and trade union movement for at least a generation, and in the process sharpen the divide, between the supporters of parliamentary action primarily the ILP, and the militants such as Ablett, who rejected on the surface at least, the whole idea of so called Parliamentary democracy as a capitalist con trick, and “*votes as playthings to keep children quiet*”.⁴²

41 *The Colliery Guardian*, 23 October 1908, p.802, North of England Institute of Mining, Newcastle Upon Tyne. For an account of the difficulties faced by the students at Ruskin see Craik WW, *The Central Labour College*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1964, p.61 where Craik outlines the difficulties that he and another student faced in attempting to obtain the support of the Labour Party for funding Ruskin College.

42 *The Merthyr Pioneer*, 10 November 1917, p.3. Despite his rejection of the parliamentary line, Ablett's attitude to

The formation of the Plebs League at Ruskin College in October 1908 as a means of articulating not only student grievances, but also as was suggested, “*To bring about a definite and more satisfactory connection between Ruskin and the Labour Movement*”,⁴³ was both the beginning and the end of a momentous chapter in labour history.

It was an end because it marked the final rejection of the WEA/Ruskin axis by some of the most militant students in the country; students who within three years would be leading the Cambrian Combine strike and other industrial disputes which came to define the era.

It was also in many ways a beginning, because the formation of the Plebs League was a new front in a long-running dispute about what constituted working class education and the methodology used to indoctrinate the working class with the idea of servile obedience to their betters.

The Plebs League had no doubts as to the meaning and purpose of education for the masses. For Noah Ablett and other IWCE advocates, whoever controlled education also controlled ultimately the means of production, and the division of labour into classes. As they wrote, “*Every class that has obtained power in our history has been able to maintain it only by controlling the educational machinery*”.⁴⁴

This debate and its resulting fallout would form the backdrop to one of the most bitter and contentious disputes in the history of organised labour, as the rival factions of the WEA and Plebs League sought to promote their vision of education. For the WEA education should be about creating, “*A great highway of education and making a highway so broad and so free that brains and character would open the door to the highest and best educational fare that England had to offer*”.⁴⁵

In rejecting the WEA view Will Lawther suggested the WEA was the “*Wasted Effort Association*”. Echoing Ablett’s comments on the futility of Parliament, Lawther urged delegates at a conference in Newcastle in 1914 to reject the doss house of Westminster in favour of workers’ control of industry. Clearly consensus was nowhere to be seen.⁴⁶

Parliament could be ambiguous. A good description of this can be found in the article by David Egan entitled Noah Ablett 1883-1935, *Llafur* Vol 4 No 3. pp 19-31.

43 Plebs League, *The Burning Question of Education*, p.3.

44 *ibid.*, p.7.

45 Brown J, *The Right to Learn. The WEA in the North of England 1910-2010*, WEA, London 2010, p.10.

46 *Ibid* p.16.

The formation of the Plebs League also brought into sharp focus the divides that existed between the supporters and students of Ruskin on the one hand, and Ablett and his fellow members of the College's Marxian Society on the other. The gulf was rapidly becoming unbridgeable as the following extracts demonstrate.

In their syllabus Ruskin had stated,

The College does not exist to promote any particular political theories or to support any political party... Ruskin College is a school of citizenship and public administration for working men. He learns in order that he may raise and not rise out of the class to which he belongs.⁴⁷

Compare this with the appeal of the Central Labour College from 1909,

The workers of the United Kingdom are beginning to see that education is one of the important means of gaining that emancipation for which they long.... The failures of governments as well as the misery of the masses call for a reorganisation of national life.⁴⁸

Emancipation through education would prove to be one of the defining aspects of Noah Ablett's life, but the college and the cause to which he now pledged his allegiance would have a difficult and turbulent existence which in many ways mirrored Ablett's own life. Before the new college could even come into existence, Ruskin had to cope with a bitter and protracted strike by its students who walked out in support of their sacked Principal Dennis Hird in April 1909.

James Dennis Hird had been born in 1850 in Ashby, Lincolnshire, to a family of active and well known Primitive Methodists. In December 1884 he was ordained into the Church of England as a deacon, and a year later as a priest and curate at Christchurch Battersea. His talents soon became apparent and he was appointed to the Church of England Temperance Society.

During this time he had come under the influence of H M Hyndman and the Social Democratic Federation and was also a member of the Socialist Educational Association. When it emerged that he was a member of the SDF, Hird was forced to resign his post and leave London. He became rector of a small rural parish in Herefordshire named Eastnor far removed from the main centres of socialist agitation.

His increasing disillusionment with religion led Hird to resign from the church

⁴⁷ Plebs League, *The Burning Question of Education*, p.4.

⁴⁸ *The Appeal and Prospectus of the Central Labour College*, Oxford, 1909. Document supplied by the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. Page number not stated.

in 1896. In 1899 he was appointed first principal of Ruskin College which had been formed by Walter Vrooman and Charles Beard with the aim of preparing working men for a career in public administration. Its founding charter stated that the college must show “*neutrality in religion and politics*”,⁴⁹ a task for which Ruskin was increasingly ill-equipped as the overtures from Oxford University became more and more explicit. Colin Waugh describes the visit of Lord Curzon to Ruskin College in October 1907 as one of autocratic disdain and the suggestion of a power almost feudal in its character. Dennis Hird’s reply by contrast reflected the growing confidence of the labour movement,

In substance he said: my Lord when you speak of Ruskin College, you are not referring merely to this institution here in Oxford, for this is only a branch of a great democratic movement that has its roots all over the country. To ask Ruskin College to come into closer contact with the University is to ask the great democracy whose foundation is the Labour Movement, a democracy that in the near future will come into its own, and when it does will bring great changes in its wake.⁵⁰

The changes of which Dennis Hird spoke were to lead to his resignation in March 1909, and the secession of a number of students including Noah Ablett himself, George Harvey of the Durham Miners Association and Ebby Edwards of the Northumberland Miners, who would go on to become founder members of the Central Labour College.

The education that the new college was aiming to provide was from the beginning explicitly partisan, and aimed at the emancipation of working men and women through the medium of the class struggle as articulated by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*. The Plebs League took up this theme,

Now the very essence of the working class movement, the very reason for its existence is a desire for fundamental change in the existing social order. If we want to know what the workers' case is in any industrial dispute, we don't go to a capitalist newspaper for it. We have learnt better. Why then should we expect to get from an education controlled by the same master class, the truth about the workers, their past struggles or the possibilities of their emancipation?⁵¹

As such IWCE drew on a long tradition of working class activism which by the time of the formation of the Plebs League, centred specifically on the teaching

⁴⁹ Plebs League, *The Burning Question of Education*, p.6.

⁵⁰ Waugh C, *Plebs The Lost Legacy of Independent Working Class Education*, Post 16 Educator, Sheffield 2009, p.18.

⁵¹ The Plebs League, *What is Independent Working Class Education?* Plebs League London, 1921, p.4.

of Marxist economics, industrial history and philosophy, as a counterweight to the prevailing WEA-influenced Ruskin curriculum, which stressed the need to create a layer of class conscious workers, who would be able to smooth the rough edges off the class war and forestall the threat of revolution.

In this aim they would be aided by the ILP under the leadership of Ramsay MacDonald who sought to counter the growing influence of the militants by publishing a series of pamphlets and books under the heading of the Socialist Library which argued that the road to socialism was not through the class war, but through the medium of Parliament. In this respect the differences between the approach adopted by Ruskin and that of the ILP were minimal, the philosophical differences between the Ruskin militants and the ILP insurmountable.

It is one of the great historical ironies that many of the Ruskin militants, who later rejected the whole idea of Parliament, and came to embrace industrial unionism, Ablett, George Harvey, Will Lawther for example, had originally been members of the ILP, given its rejection of the class struggle and its stress on the constitutional road to socialism as a means of emancipation.

For an increasingly frustrated, militant and class conscious Ablett, it was only a matter of time before the threads that bound him to the ILP snapped and he started to look for an alternative to the cosy consensus politics offered by a party that was increasingly beginning to resemble the establishment it had been formed to challenge, and was starting to display some of the worst aspects of bureaucracy and reformism. On this problem it is worth recalling Tony Cliff's comment,

Rank and file agitation threw up new and vigorous forces, but the structure of the union creamed off the best of them, isolated them from their bases and dropped them into the bureaucratic mire at the top. A union official's origins in a militant syndicalist movement could not give them a lifetime inoculation against bureaucracy.⁵²

Some of this frustration was articulated by Ablett's colleague in the Unofficial Reform Committee, Charlie Gibbons, who wrote,

They were pledged to abstain from supporting reactionary politics, they were to keep revolutionary policies and militant policies to the fore: They were to force the Executive Committee to take action along lines laid down by the militant section in the coalfield. Have they done this? Unhesitatingly we say

⁵² Cliff T quoted in Darlington R, *Radical Unionism. The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2008, p.224.

No. They have ceased to be revolutionary except in words. In the matter of deeds, they are not to be distinguished from members of the openly reactionary majority on the EC.⁵³

The break with the ILP finally came in 1910 and Ablett found that alternative in what became known as industrial unionism, an approach which rejected all forms of parliamentary activity as a means by which the capitalist class were able to divert people away from the class struggle and towards safe forms of political expression where they would pose no threat to the status quo. His rejection of the parliamentary line was never more clearly illustrated than in the following passage,

I confidently assert that the individual organisations of the workers contain in themselves all the power necessary to destroy the old capitalist society, and all the machinery necessary to construct the new communist society. Political democracy is essentially a capitalist institution forged by capitalism with the main object of enlisting the worker against feudalism.⁵⁴

Ablett had certainly travelled a long way since his early days in the ILP, so just what were the influences that he had come under while at Ruskin which contributed to this fundamental political and cultural shift? What were the personalities and political currents that he was increasingly beginning to identify with and how did they play out in reality, both during and after his time at Ruskin?

In the evolution of his views Ablett was heavily influenced by the American Marxist Daniel de Leon and also the SLP. Daniel de Leon was a Marxist academic of mixed Venezuelan-Jewish heritage, a former Professor of Law at Harvard, who had been active in the Socialist Labor Party of America.

Like his British contemporary in the SDF, Hyndman, he began as a supporter of electoral politics, but had increasingly come to the conclusion that the trade union bureaucracy, as represented by Samuel Gompers's American Federation of Labor, needed to be broken. De Leon argued that the way to do this was to create industrial unions regardless of a worker's trade and that this would create a position of strength from which to attack the capitalist class.

Ablett and others would develop and refine this idea, most notably in *The Miners' Next Step*, so that it eventually became a rejection of the whole notion of

⁵³ Ibid p.224.

⁵⁴ Davis K, *Rival Prophets? William Ferris Hay, Noah Ablett and the Debate over Working Class Political Action in the South Wales Coalfield 1910-1914*, Llafur, Vol 7 No 344 1998-99, p.95.

trade union leadership, but the seeds had been planted during De Leon's speaking tour in Scotland and England in 1904 when a group of disaffected members of the SDF formed a British branch of the SLP.

Colin Waugh suggests that by the time of the Ruskin struggle, the SLP had branches in the North East and Oxford among others.⁵⁵ It is therefore safe to assume that Noah Ablett would have been not only aware, but also influenced by De Leon and the SLP at this time, for their teaching methods were increasingly in tune with the developing idea of IWCE as Ablett and



Ruskin College Industrial Unionist group 1908

others would later articulate through the pages of *Plebs* and other labour periodicals. Bill Craik recalled the reverence that he and other students had for Marx,

He taught us that no aspect or part of life could be understood unless viewed in its historically conditioned existence, in its coming into being and passing away. Nothing in objective reality exists on its own, whether it be a physical organism or a social organisation.... It was by applying this method of understanding to those changes that it became clear to us that education was not something leading an independent life of its own, something existing in and by itself, unconditioned by the economic and political reactions of society, and qualitatively equal in value for all classes, for rulers and ruled alike.⁵⁶

This worship of the cult of the individual was to be demonstrated through the pedagogical style of teaching developed by the SLP. Colin Waugh quotes Tom Bell as recalling,

Our method in the classes was to open with an inaugural survey of the whole

⁵⁵ Waugh, op cit, p.10. For a detailed description of the SLP in the North East of England. See Walker G, *George Harvey. The Conflict between the Ideology of Industrial Unionism and the practice of its principals in the Durham Coalfield prior to 1914*, Ruskin College Diploma Thesis, 1982. I am grateful to Gateshead Library for letting me view this important piece of research.

⁵⁶ Craik W W, *The Central Labour College*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1964, p.70.

field we proposed to traverse and to make the workers familiar with the subject as a whole; the textbooks etc. *Wage, Labour and Capital, Value, Price and Profit, Capital*. Each student was given a series of definitions of terms used by Marx. These had to be studied, memorised and discussed for perhaps the first four weeks. At the class we would read it over paragraph by paragraph, round the class. This practice aimed at helping students to speak fluently and grammatically. At the following class meetings, questions would be put and answered, and the points raised thoroughly understood by everyone. The results of each lesson being summarised by the leader.⁵⁷

As a theoretical grounding in Marx, this method had a lot to recommend it. Just as important were the classes held on a Sunday afternoon. Bell describes the classes,

We had two and half hours tuition; reading out aloud, questions and answers to last week's lessons, short discussions and examination of homework, after which tea was made and for another hour we talked and discussed freely on all matter of political and educational subjects. An hours respite and we would repair to Buchanan Street or to Glasgow Green to hold forth on socialist propaganda to large audiences who collected there every Sunday night.⁵⁸

This method of teaching plus the practical experience gained in public speaking meant that many students came out of the CLC and SLP classes as extremely articulate and eloquent orators, able to hold forth in meetings, but also capable of taking classes when called upon. They would need all the eloquence they could muster as the new labour college, soon to be known simply as the CLC, and the accompanying regional classes, under the auspices of the Plebs League, began to take shape. In an article in *Plebs*, Ablett issued his call to arms,

The Plebs have dug the trenches and are informed of the enemy's fortifications. They hereupon call upon the trade unions, in the interests of the working class, to join with them in what may be one of the greatest and most fruitful movements of modern time. What will be the response?⁵⁹

2 August 1909 and the opening of the CLC

On 2 August 1909 Noah Ablett was to receive his response. At a packed meeting of the Plebs League in Oxford, some 200 representatives from various trade union bodies, students and ex-students met to hear a report on the events that had been taking place in Ruskin over the previous several years, and the reasons

⁵⁷ Waugh, op cit p.15.

⁵⁸ Ibid p.15.

⁵⁹ Craik, op cit, pp.65-66.

for the recent strike.

George Sims then outlined the reasons for the formation of the new college,

Recognising that the last link which bound Ruskin College to the Labour Movement had been broken, the majority of the students had taken the bold step of trying to found a new college owned and controlled by the organised Labour Movement.⁶⁰

Ablett then moved a resolution which declared that, *“This Conference of workers declares that the time has now arrived when the working class should enter the educational world to work out its own problems for itself.”*⁶¹

The Central Labour College opened its doors for the first time in September 1909 at Bradmore Road in Oxford, with a lecture staff of five which included the Principal, Dennis Hurd, fresh from his bruising battle at Ruskin and a provisional committee which included Noah Ablett, Mary Bridges Adams, Ted Gill and George Sims.

From the beginning it was an auspicious start. *The Times* newspaper, never a friend of the workers’ cause, reported the opening of the new college,

A conference called by the Plebs League was held at Oxford yesterday to consider the desirability of founding a Central Labour College in Oxford. About 100 persons were present, the majority being delegates from Labour organisations. The representatives of the press were excluded, but at the conclusion of the meeting, a delegate furnished a report of the proceedings. He stated that Mr G Sims, the secretary of the Plebs League reported on the steps that had been taken to establish a Labour College. He attacked the Ruskin College authorities, but he admitted that no trade union had as yet promised financial support to the new college. He stated however that one district of the South Wales Miners Federation, the Western Valleys had passed a resolution in favour of a penny levy in aid of the scheme. He reiterated the allegation that there was an attempt to link up Ruskin College with the University of Oxford. A discussion followed on the question of independence in working class education. The principle was generally approved of.

Mr Dennis Hurd formerly Principal of Ruskin College and others spoke in favour of the establishment of the Central Labour College, but there were some differences of opinion, and it was urged that Ruskin College should be brought into line with the demands of the Labour Movement. The resolution

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.82.

⁶¹ Ibid, p.82.

in favour of the establishment of the Central Labour College was carried. With regard to the constitution of the provisional committee of the new college, it was suggested that two thirds of the representation should come from the trade unions and one third from the Plebs. An amendment was proposed that the provisional committee should be formed of Labour, Co Operative and Socialist Societies on the same basis as the Labour Representation League. The amendment was carried by a large majority.⁶²

From its inception in 1909 through to its closure in 1929, the new college led a precarious financial existence, and was heavily dependent for its survival on the financial backing of the SWMF and the NUR. By 1915 the situation had become such a matter of grave concern that the SWMF was forced to formally take over the running of the college, a development which was to later have far reaching consequences as we shall see.

The classes provided by the CLC were from the outset heavily influenced by the students' concept of education and their experiences of working life, so, for example, the syllabus of 1909 included classes in industrial history, the history of social movements, political and social problems, economics and evolution, all taught within a Marxist framework, amid a climate of growing industrial militancy and class war.

The mix was potent and on his return to South Wales in 1909 as checkweighman at Mardy colliery, Ablett would be in the forefront of the industrial maelstrom that convulsed Britain in the years from 1909 to 1913 for his arrival back in the Rhondda was to coincide with some of the most bitter and entrenched periods of class conflict that Britain has ever experienced.

This was the period that liberal historians used to describe as the Great Unrest, the time of Irish Home Rule agitation, of the militant suffragettes, of the great constitutional battles between Asquith's Liberal government, and the House of Lords. It is the era of the Llanelli shootings in 1911, of the Tonypandy riots and the Cambrian Combine dispute of 1910 out of which came *The Miners' Next Step* in which Ablett would play a leading role as a revolutionary propagandist for the industrial unionist cause.⁶³

⁶² *The Times*, 3 August 1909, p.4.

⁶³ This period has been extensively researched by historians. For a good account of the shootings at Llanelli in 1911, see Griffiths R, *Killing No Murder. South Wales and the Great Railway Strike of 1911*, Manifesto Press, Croydon, 2009. Also of use for background reading, is Evans D, *Labour Strife in the South Wales Coalfield. A Historical and Critical Record of the Mid Rhondda, Aberdare Valley and Other Strikes*, Educational Publishing Co Ltd, Cardiff, 1911.

His weapons were magazines such as *Plebs*, the mass meeting and the local media such as the *Aberdare Leader* and *Rhondda Leader*. The *Aberdare Leader* reported the formation of Plebs League Classes in the South Wales Valleys,

The Plebs Magazine. This is the name of a magazine which has been initiated at Oxford in connection with the Ruskin movement. In the first editorial note, the function of the Plebs is explained as follows. To make clear the real position of Ruskin College, to point out its present weakness, to outline its possibilities, to demonstrate its values to the Labour Movement if definitely founded thereon, to stimulate active interest in working class education and to open out propaganda of an educational character from the working class point of view. Such will be the policy pursued in this magazine.

The committee of management consists of four students together with the secretary who is an ex student. Mr Noah Ablett of the Rhondda contributes a good article on the relation of Ruskin College to the Labour Movement. We learn that a South Wales wing of the Plebs movement has been formed. For propaganda purposes, South Wales and Monmouthshire have been divided into three districts one of which embraces Rhondda, Aberdare and Merthyr. A branch has been formed at Merthyr with Mr W.J Edwards 365 Cardiff Road as secretary.⁶⁴

So in February 1909 with the embryonic Plebs League taking shape, and the emergence of a new generation of militants, bent on the reform of the South Wales Miners Federation, the stage was set for a new chapter in the class war which would come to define not only South Wales but also much of the industrial areas of Britain in the following decade.

In this struggle, Ablett and the other members of what became known as the Unofficial Reform Committee would play a leading role, for central to their beliefs was that of the looming showdown between labour and capital, and the need for the working class to be educated to a level where theory and praxis were indistinguishable.

The first shot would be fired, fittingly enough, in Ablett's own fiefdom of the Rhondda. The resulting conflict would shake the entire society of the South Wales coalfield to its very foundations, and in the process leave a legacy of bitterness and class division, which would endure for years and for which Ablett and his followers and must bear some responsibility.

64 *The Aberdare Leader*, 20 February, 1909, p.8.

CHAPTER 4

A Bonfire on a Welsh Hillside

The Cambrian Combine Strike and *The Miners' Next Step*

The Cambrian Combine strike of 1910, which began in the autumn of that year at the Ely Pit Penygraig, in the Rhondda Valley, was one of the longest running and most violent industrial disputes ever to take place in British history. Its ramifications would be felt far beyond the narrow confines of the South Wales valleys, and would fundamentally alter the industrial and political nature of British society for a generation or more. The history of the Cambrian Combine dispute and its outcomes, merits a full scale study on its own, so in this chapter Ablett's role and that of the URC will be summarized using mainly newspaper reports of the time.⁶⁵

Out of the violence resulting from a failure to agree a price list for the cutting of small coal in what were known in South Wales as abnormal places, would come the now mythologised Tonypandy riots of 1910, about which Dai Smith has written perhaps the best account.⁶⁶ The strike would see Home Secretary Winston Churchill order mounted troops into the Rhondda in order to quell a dispute which had very quickly spiralled out of control, and which at its peak involved an estimated over 230,000 men or one sixth of the total workforce.⁶⁷

Out of this seemingly interminable class war, would come the first ever minimum wage for miners in 1912, and the publication of *The Miners' Next Step* that same year, but perhaps more importantly, it would bring Noah Ablett to the forefront of the industrial struggle in South Wales, as a proponent of a new form of industrial warfare in which the all-out strike was a major weapon. Drawing on the principles established at the founding conference of the IWW which stated,

A movement to fulfil these conditions must consist of one great industrial union embracing all industries, providing for craft autonomy locally, industrial autonomy internationally, and working class unity generally.

It must be founded on the class struggle, and its general administration must be conducted in harmony with the recognition of the irrepressible conflict

⁶⁵ For a detailed account of the Cambrian strike, see Evans D, *Labour Strife in the South Wales Coalfield 1910-1911*, Educational Publishing Company, Cardiff 1911. Evans was the industrial correspondent for *The Western Mail*, a paper not noted for its allegiance to the socialist cause. His account is written from the employer's point of view. The Cambrian dispute is in need of an up-to-date study of its own, although it features prominently in many works on the period.

⁶⁶ Smith D, 'Tonypandy 1910 Definitions of Community', *Past and Present*, No 87, May 1980 pp.158-184.

⁶⁷ Page Arnott, *op cit* p.182.

between the capitalist class and the working class.

It should be established as the economic organization of the working class, without affiliation with any political party.

All power should rest in a collective membership.⁶⁸

Ablett and the other members of the Unofficial Reform Committee argued, “A *united industrial organization which recognising the war of interest between workers and employers is constructed on fighting lines allowing for a rapid and simultaneous stoppage of wheels throughout the mining industry.*”⁶⁹

That the dispute began through an accident of geology 250 million years previously, which made the cutting of coal very expensive, and highly dangerous, is something that neither the workers nor management could be blamed for, but the result of this geological fault which had occurred in the Cambrian era, hence the name, was to have far reaching consequences for the South Wales coal industry. The strike would harden attitudes between the coal owners and their workforce to the point where conciliation in the form advocated by Mabon, was all but impossible, something which the coal owners never forgot in the industrial slump which hit South Wales after 1921.

Before the events of 1910, Ablett had been known as a propagandist of some note for the ILP, and in particular the Plebs League throughout South Wales.⁷⁰ The events of 1910-1912 would elevate his stature to a new level, both among the miners who looked to the URC for guidance, and to the coal owners who came to despise him as a militant who would stop at nothing in order to bring the coal industry to its knees.

The ramifications of the Ruskin College strike would soon be felt far beyond Oxford. As Hywel Francis puts it, “*The South Wales Miners indicated in the following year their political and educational independence by their support of the Ruskin College strike which led to those pre-eminently Marxist Institutions the Central Labour College and the Plebs League becoming so much part of the future of the coalfield.*”⁷¹

The education many miners and others received at the Central Labour College

68 This statement can be found on the website of the IWW at www.iww.org

69 *The Miners' Next Step*, op cit, p.22.

70 See for example the *Barry Herald*, 19 July 1907 and 23 April 1909. Noah Ablett was a very busy man at this period. As well as his various political activities, he was to marry Annie Howels in 1912 and would go on to have a son George and a daughter Beatrice.

71 Francis H, Smith D, *The Fed A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, op cit p.10.

enabled them to see the world from a different viewpoint and in many ways it is argued, pre-empted the internecine class warfare, which came to define the period 1910 to 1920. George Barker, a contemporary of Ablett and a member of the CLC Provisional Committee for the Western Valleys, wrote in *Plebs*,

Do our Labour MPs think we have built up our industrial organisation just to send them to Parliament? Do they think that if this Parliament lasts for another 5 years that the workers are going to wait asinine patience for another Parliament to deal with their demands? One thing above others bitter experience has taught the worker and that is that his great strength lies in his power to withhold his labour. This is no time for tilted or decorated MPs to decry the power and strength of our industrial organisations. The man who belittles the supreme importance of industrial organisation is no friend of the workers and the sooner the workers realise this the better for them.⁷²

At this point there was no minimum wage in the mining industry and miners were simply paid according to how much coal they could cut in one shift. The result of this was that many miners were struggling financially through no fault of their own, and needed the Conciliation Board to agree a price for coal cutting. This body had been set up in the wake of the 1898 lock out, which had seen the formation of the Fed and acted as a means of arbitration between coal owners and their employees. By 1910 this agreement had been strained to breaking point due to the introduction of the eight hour day, and economic forces which nobody seemed able to master.

In hindsight the issue of a price for small coal should have been trivial, and could and should have been resolved without recourse to strike action, but this was 1910, the beginnings of an explosion in industrial relations, which almost brought Britain to the brink of revolution in the decade which followed, and in which the students returning from the CLC armed with the theories of Marx, Dietzgen, Connolly, De Leon and others would play a leading part. As such the students returning from the CLC were in no mood to compromise. It was not just the seemingly outdated attitude of Mabon that the younger militant miners despised, but more importantly what he represented. As Mabon's biographer Eric Wyn Evans says,

Recurrent illness had sapped his customary energy. He was not able to fight the rising tide of socialism and class consciousness that threatened his position and his ideals. What he regarded as the agitation of a few extremists was in fact a mass movement created in part by the failure of his policy. His

⁷² Barker G, 'Parliamentarism and the Servile State', *Plebs*, April 1919, p.39.

only recourse was to condemn what he could neither prevent nor perhaps even understand.⁷³

This failure to understand the changes that were taking place among the rank and file was what would lead in the end to Mabon's downfall, for, as David Evans the industrial correspondent for the *Western Mail*, observed,

The causes were no less personal and political than they were industrial and economic. For over eighteen months prior to the outbreak at the mid Rhondda Collieries of the Cambrian Colliery Combine, a severe contest for supremacy had been waged between the younger and older leaders of the South Wales Miners Federation. The younger leaders were socialists imbued with communistic theories concerning the relations of capital and labour and the older leaders were orthodox trade unionists.⁷⁴

The orthodox trade unionists included long-standing and revered leaders such as Mabon, whose policy of conciliation was coming under increasing attack from a section of younger men, who had absorbed the teachings of De Leon and others who argued for a policy of all-out strike action based on class unity. In addition to the hostility displayed towards Mabon, other leaders such as John Wilson of the Durham Miners Association were also coming under sustained and vicious attack by their members.⁷⁵

As such the policy of universal collective strike action, in order to paralyse an industry, held a particular place in the philosophy of industrial unionism and so the Cambrian Combine dispute was its first big test. It is clear that Noah Rees as Secretary of the Cambrian Lodge had done his work well. The 26 districts of the colliery sent almost 50 delegates to the full committee of the Cambrian Lodge. Supporting this was a joint committee representing the whole combine and as an addition there was already an unofficial reform committee which had grown out of the Plebs League.⁷⁶ As such the conditions were in place for a showdown, not only between labour and capital, but also between the liberal trade union bureaucracy of the Fed and the young militants intent on ousting them.

The *Cardiff Times* captured the defiant mood among a workforce who increasingly believed they had nothing left to lose,

73 Evans E W, *Mabon A Study in Trade Union Leadership*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff 1959, p.88.

74 Evans D, *Labour Strife in the South Wales Coalfield 1910-1911*, Educational Publishing Company Ltd, Cardiff 1911, p.1. See also Page Arnot, *op cit*, p.175.

75 George Harvey, a miner from Durham, and a fellow student of Ablett's at Ruskin and later one of the founders of the North East Labour College, wrote in 1912 as editor of *The Socialist*, an article entitled, "Does Dr John Wilson MP serve the working class?" Wilson sued Harvey for libel and won.

76 Page Arnot, *op cit* p.176

A mass meeting of the Combine Workmen was held at the Mid Rhondda Athletic Grounds on Sunday afternoon to receive a report to receive a report from the delegates who attended the coalfield conference on the previous day and to decide upon a course of action. Mr W John of the Glamorgan Lodge presided and there were over 7000 miners present..... Mr Brace stated they were of the opinion that whenever an employer or company attacked a section of their workmen, it would be the policy of the executive to call out the whole of the men employed by that particular firm in support of their fellow workmen and in this instance they were prepared to call out the whole of the Combine men in support of the Ely men.⁷⁷

So it was that on 1 November 1910 three months after lock out notices were first posted in the Ely pit that the strike began. From the beginning the strike was characterised by an unprecedented level of violence on both sides as the following account of the time describes,

Never in the tempestuous history of the Cambrian strike has a more turbulent meeting taken place than that which was held on Wednesday afternoon at the Mid Rhondda Athletic Grounds..... Enoch Morell and David Watts Morgan were interrupted at almost every turn and the proceedings developed at one stage into a free fight at which the combatants lashed out vigorously left and right. The proceedings were eventually adjourned.... Earlier in the day Mr Vernon Hartstion, Mr Enoch Morrel Mr Noah Ablett on behalf of the executive met the Cambrian Workmen's joint committee at the Ebenzer schoolroom.... The Committee decide to advise the workmen to return to work on the May terms.⁷⁸

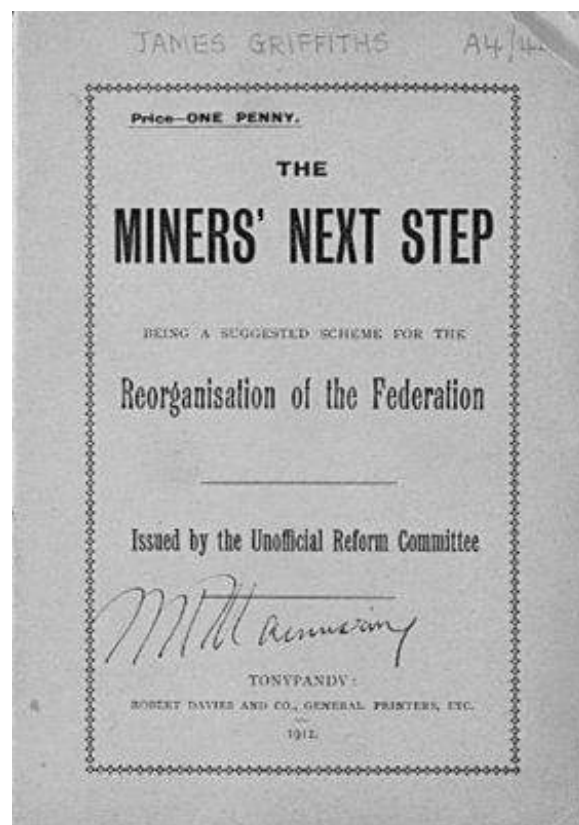
It was a tragic set of circumstances that led to Ablett being elected to the Executive Committee of the Fed. In January 1911 on their way to a Miners Federation Conference called to discuss the demands for a universal minimum wage, three members of the South Wales executive were killed in a railway accident. This was a huge blow to Mabon and the conservative members of the union. In the election which followed, militants who had been fighting Mabon were elected to the Executive. These were Tom Smith, John Hopla, and Noah Rees, secretary of the Cambrian Lodge. Also elected was Noah Ablett himself. The militants now had their foot in the door and they were determined that they would not rest until the door was kicked in.

⁷⁷ *Cardiff Times*, 24 September 1910, p.9.

⁷⁸ *Rhondda Leader*, 19 August 1911, p.4.

The Miners' Next Step

The end of the Cambrian Combine dispute in autumn 1911 after almost a year on strike was a bitter blow to all concerned, but out of this seemingly crushing defeat and the acceptance of the coal owners' original terms grew the demand for a national minimum wage which was to be finally granted in 1912 after a protracted strike. The end of the strike and also the Ely pit lock out had also seen the end of Mabon. In September of that year he received 13,450 votes as a South Wales delegate to the International Miners Federation, as opposed to CB Stanton's 27,008.⁷⁹



Within a few months Mabon would also decide to resign from the Fed on the grounds of ill health. Thus a new chapter and a new policy for the Fed were being created out of the ashes of the Cambrian debacle. This policy would culminate in the publication of *The Miners' Next Step*, a document of seminal importance in the history of the labour movement whose influence is still being argued over today and which remains Ablett's lasting legacy. Having said this, the pamphlet was very much a collaborative venture, co-authored by the members of the URC, Noah Rees, Charlie Gibbons, W F Hay, Will Mainwaring and Ablett himself.

The *Miners' Next Step* was published in Tonymandy in 1912 by Robert Davies and Co. Ablett is said to have written the first draft before it was sent out for discussion among the URC. Its importance lay in the precise distillation of a set of revolutionary demands, allied to the day-to-day tasks of running a trade union. For example its rejection of conciliation as a means by which the coal owners could depress wages, was a statement that found a willing audience among a workforce whose economic security was increasingly precarious.⁸⁰

Second, its rejection of leadership as a means by which the men are kept in order while the leaders acquire social standing and prestige in the community, could be seen clearly in Mabon's attitude towards the coal owners, and in

⁷⁹ Page Arnot, *op cit*, p.268.

⁸⁰ See for example the online blog of *Red Pepper* magazine, 4 June 2012.

particular D A Thomas, the owner of the Cambrian Combine group of collieries, with whom Mabon enjoyed a close personal friendship, much to the dismay of men such as Mainwaring who in reply to Mabon's plea that the men call off their strike is supposed to have replied, "*D A Thomas may be your friend Mabon, he is not our friend.*"⁸¹

The effect of *The Miners' Next Step* was to expose the growing gulf between the leadership of the labour and trade union movement and the rank and file who they claimed to represent. Central to this ferment was Tom Mann who as editor of *The Industrial Syndicalist* seems to have found a willing audience among the South Wales miners, to the extent that as early as 1910, Noah Ablett is listed as a delegate to a conference on industrial syndicalism in Manchester from among No 38 group of Rhondda miners.⁸²

It is within the context of the Cambrian strike, the unceasing propaganda efforts of Ablett, Mann and others and the growing hostility towards Mabon that we must place *The Miners' Next Step*. Many of its demands were simply too revolutionary for a workforce who wanted no more than economic security and a safe working environment in which to earn a living, but as a discussion document, its potential for workers' control, as opposed to outright nationalisation has never been put into practice. Commenting on the nationalisation of mines, the authors' comment seems prophetic in light of postwar events,

Does not lead in this direction, but simply makes a National Trust with all the forces of the government behind it, whose one concern will be, to see that the industry is run in such a way as to pay the interest on the bonds, with which the coal owners are paid out, and to extract as much profit as possible in order to relieve the taxation of other landlords and capitalists.⁸³

The Miners' Next Step may have been utopian in its intent, and revolutionary in its ambitions, but as a statement of what could be achieved through class unity and industrial solidarity, it had and continues to have few equals.

81 Page Arnot, *op cit*, p.177.

82 *The Industrial Syndicalist*, 26 November 1910, p.8.

83 *The Miners' Next Step*, *op cit* p.29-30.

CHAPTER 5

A False Utopia

First World War and the Russian Revolution

In this chapter I will discuss the reaction of Noah Ablett and others to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the ideological problems that this created. For syndicalists such as Ablett, the emergence of Lenin and the Bolsheviks created a dilemma, for, as Reiner Tosstorff has noted, “*Before 1914 the Bolsheviks had for the purpose of orthodox Marxism fought stridently against syndicalism as a negative deviation.*”⁸⁴

This factionalism was brought to an end by the outbreak of war in August 1914 which helped to heal the divisions among the various groups on the left for a time, and indeed Ablett himself attended the Leeds Conference in June 1917 which as, James Hinton argues, “*served to release some of the pent up energy of anti-war socialists in Britain.*”⁸⁵

For the purposes of this chapter syndicalism is that which was defined by Ablett and W F Hay in their pamphlet, *A Minimum Wage for Miners* when they argue that,

Parliamentary Action is secondary in importance to industrial action. It is industrial action alone that makes political action effective, but with or without Parliamentary Action, industrial solidarity will ensure economic freedom, and therefore the abolition of capitalism, and all its accompanying poverty and misery.⁸⁶

The emergence of a revolutionary syndicalist movement dedicated to overthrowing capitalism by direct action and industrial solidarity was the result of a growing dissatisfaction with orthodox labour and trade union movements which many workers saw as becoming increasingly reformist in nature. Several examples can be given.

In the USA the rise of the Industrial Workers of the World (The Wobblies) can be partially seen as a reaction to Samuel Gompers’s American Federation of Labor. In South Wales this growing disaffection manifested itself in increasing hostility to

⁸⁴ Tosstorff R, *Syndicalists and the Bolshevik Revolution in Syndicalism and Radical Unionism, Socialist History*, No 37, Rivers Oram Press, London, 2010, pp.46-47.

⁸⁵ Hinton J, *The First Shop Stewards Movement*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1972, p.239.

⁸⁶ Ablett N, Hay W F, *A Minimum Wage for Miners. What It Means and How To Get It, The Industrial Syndicalist*, February 1911, p.36, reprint Spokesmen Books, Nottingham, 1974.

the consensual politics of Mabon as described in Chapter 4.

What then were the attractions of syndicalism and how did they differ from traditional labour politics? The first difference lay in a visceral dislike of the conservatism and reformist tactics adopted by many of the major social democratic parties such as the Labour Party.

Syndicalists argued that parliamentary action must be subordinate to unified industrial action, for only by fighting on the economic front through collective direct action could workers hope to achieve their gains. In practice this meant spontaneous strikes, sabotage, work-to-rule, stay down protests etc. In short anything that would hurt the capitalists economically, and deprive them of their profits.

The second difference lay in the hostility many syndicalists felt towards the traditional trade union movement. For syndicalists collective bargaining, arbitration through the traditional channels were seen as devices to keep the working class subordinate to their masters.

In opposition to this, syndicalists argued that the way to emancipation lay not in small sectarian craft unions, but in one big industrial union which would through its growing strength eventually lead to a revolution and the overthrow of capitalism by workers' control. As Ablett puts it,

A main idea of this movement, one of its cardinal principles, is to be able to paralyse an industry. Now sectional unionism is the cause of the riots in South Wales..... I belong to an organisation which differs fundamentally from most organisations. We open our membership books to all men working in the mines and thus the South Wales Union is not a craft union. The mission of the workers is not to go in for increased wages for themselves, but to emancipate the whole of the working class.⁸⁷

The outbreak of war in August 1914 showed not only the limitations of Noah Ablett's vision, but also perhaps more ominously for Ablett and for the future, its potential rejection by a large majority of the South Wales population as Tom Mann discovered when he spoke at Treorchy in 1919,

Mann stated I am the man that is going to get you five days a week and more than £1 per day, and this can only got by sticking to me. He was then interrupted by discharged soldiers who shouted, "*We don't want you to fight for us, send Lloyd George here, he is the man we want*". Mann replied, Yes

⁸⁷ *First Conference on Industrial Syndicalism*, Coal Exchange, Manchester, 26 November 1910, p.21.

he is the man to send you to Russia and to conscript you. At this point the Red Flag was sung, but was immediately drowned out by Rule Britannia and the National Anthem. It then appears that the crowd rushed the stage, and Mann and his supporters were escorted away by the police.

The Home Office Directorate of Intelligence noted that Ablett had had a similar experience at Ton Pentre.⁸⁸

Ablett's vision of a self-sustaining community unencumbered by false prophets and bureaucratic, conservative trade union leaders who claimed to be representing workers, but in reality were conspiring with the capitalists to keep them in servitude, and where the working class would become masters of their own destiny, was shown to be a utopian dream.

Nowhere was this rejection more keenly felt than in Merthyr where the sitting MP was none other than James Keir Hardie, a man synonymous with internationalism and peace, and the editor of the local socialist paper, *The Merthyr Pioneer*.

Kenneth O Morgan describes how Hardie was received by the people who had once revered him. Having been as Morgan puts it, "*reviled and abused as never before, he then decided to carry the fight to his Welsh constituency.*"⁸⁹ At Aberdare on the 6 August 1914, his meeting was howled down by a crowd delirious with jingoistic fervour, under the leadership of CB Stanton, the local miners' agent.

Afterwards Hardie concluded that he now understood the sufferings of Christ at Gethsemane. Morgan is right to say that Hardie's "*self-identification with his saviour was leading him towards his own crucifixion,*"⁹⁰ for within a year he would be dead, broken by the shattering experiences of such events.

For many Welsh socialists such as Noah Ablett, the events of August 1914 would be just as shattering. Having been brought up to believe that the interests of the working class were incompatible with capitalism, and that the only war worth fighting was the class war, Ablett and his supporters looked on aghast as thousands of Welsh miners flocked to the colours in what Lenin famously described as an imperialist war.⁹¹

88 Home Office Directorate of Intelligence, 7 August 1919, p.8. For a different view of Tom Mann's treatment in South Wales see *The Merthyr Pioneer*, 5 July 1919, "Merthyr says Hands Off".

89 Morgan K O, *Keir Hardie Radical and Socialist*, Orion Books, London, 1997, p.265.

90 Ibid, p.266.

91 Lenin VI, *The State and Revolution*, Penguin Books, London, 1992, preface, p.3.

The outbreak of war also saw the departure of one of the founder members of the CLC, George Sims, who left to go the front, and the closure of the CLC itself which would not reopen until 1919. Ironically it was Ablett himself who was given the honour of re-opening the college in September of that year.

Despite the difficulties caused by the war the years between 1914 and 1919 were when Ablett's reputation reached its peak. This was years his oratory was at its most vituperative, and where his influence on events such as the South Wales miners' strike of 1915 was at its most potent.

Typical of this time was a speech he gave at the Ferndale Labour Club on 2 September 1916 in which he pointed out, "*That the industrial war of the classes since the development of capitalism was greater in magnitude, involved more people and showed heavier casualty lists than the present war.*" He goes on to point out that freedom for the Belgian working classes simply meant the potential for exploitation by the German capitalists and that the degree of real freedom could be measured by the amount of control that people had of their own conditions of livelihood.⁹²

Ablett finished his speech by suggesting that the real mission of industrial unionism was for the working class to control the world and its results from the bottom up, which makes it highly surprising that he seems to have viewed the 1917 Russian Revolution with trepidation, bordering on scepticism.

To understand Ablett's views on Bolshevism, it is necessary to define what is meant by the term industrial unionism as the authors of *The Miners' Next Step* argued. The ambiguous attitude towards Parliament and politics was never better illustrated than in this most famous of syndicalist publications which stated,

Political Action must go on side by side with industrial action. Such measures as the Mines Bill, Workmen's Compensation Acts, proposals for nationalising the mines etc demand the presence in Parliament of men who directly represent and are amenable to the wishes and instructions of the workmen.⁹³

92 *The Merthyr Pioneer*, 2 September 1916, p.2. See also 20 December 1919, p.3 for Ablett's views on Russia and on Bolshevism in general. His description of the British as being ruled by a small minority of dirty greasy profiteers whose politics were in their purses is worth quoting. He suggests that the fear of Bolshevism was down to the fear of work, for if men would not work, they should not rule. Ibid.

93 *The Miners, Next Step*, op cit, p.24. See also Williams C, *Democratic Rhondda. Politics and Society 1885-1951*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff 1996, p.122. Nina Fishman writes that Ablett's position towards Lenin and the Communist International was similar to Kautsky's. She argues that most British communists were more impressed by the democratic side of the October revolution than the Leninist prescriptions which followed. They did not study the

Both Ablett and Lenin agreed on the ends, but differed sharply on the means. For Lenin and the Bolsheviks who seized power in 1917, the revolution would be led by a small band of dedicated revolutionaries acting as the vanguard of the working class movement, who would then seize power on behalf of the whole class and exercise that power through the state with the intention of eventually abolishing the state all together, in the way Marx and Engels had argued.

Both Ablett and Lenin saw the state as an instrument of class oppression which would ultimately have to be removed if socialism was to succeed, but whereas the Bolsheviks had no hesitation in using state terror to control the population, syndicalists argued that this form of oppression was counterproductive.

For a dedicated syndicalist such as Noah Ablett, the debate around whether socialism was to be achieved through the state, or by workers acting on their own initiative carried echoes of an earlier struggle, namely the agitation to achieve a eight hour day for miners and the demands for a minimum wage in the years just before the First World War.

Keith Davies writes that in the years between 1910 and 1914, “*The debate has often seen to be polarised between those who advocated the political route to socialism, and those who advocated the only viable weapon to be the industrial muscle in the labour movement exercised through the trade unions and workers control.*”⁹⁴

This debate was to reach its peak in the publication of *The Miners' Next Step* and in the set piece debate which took place at Trealew on 13 November 1912 in which Ablett and W F Hay set out their respective positions. For Ablett the question was simple. As he asked his audience, “*Are we willing to let ignorance in Whitehall sit in judgement on knowledge in the Rhondda, to let the man who does not know govern the men who do?*”⁹⁵

Hay on the other hand could denounce Parliament as,

An institution which can never afford the pathway along which a subject class can travel to freedom. It can only obscure the issue, blunt the instincts

implications of democratic centralism nor the dictatorship of the proletariat, Fishman N, *Communists in the Coalfield*, p.95 in *Miners, Unions and Politics 1910-1947*, ed. Campbell A, Fishman N and Howell D, Scholar Press, Aldershot 1996.

94 Davies K, 'Rival Prophets, William Ferris Hay, Noah Ablett and the Debate Over Working Class Political Action in the South Wales Coalfield 1910-1914', *Llafur*, Vol 7 No 344, 1998-99, p.89.

95 Ibid p.96.

of the working class and throw a veil over the class struggle by making the worker lose his identity as a worker in the simulacrum of citizenship. Society the nation, the community, the people are all phrases which serve as a snare for the workers, phrases which are used to beguile the workers by the pimps, panders and prostitutes who play the game of politics in Parliament.⁹⁶

So it would appear that there was more that united Ablett and Hay than what divided them. Commenting on the agitation to achieve a minimum wage for miners, they both note that it had taken 25 years of the political struggle to achieve an eight hour day, and that therefore to rely on political action would lead to an indefinite postponement of the question of a minimum wage, therefore it was vital that if a minimum wage was introduced, it was done quickly through the miners own efforts.⁹⁷

Ablett's views on the Russian revolution can be traced back to his long battle to win the SWMF (The Fed) around to workers' control and his hatred of bureaucratic centralism, which stifled initiative and freedom at crucial times, most notably during the Cambrian Combine strike of 1910-11, which ultimately gave rise to the Unofficial Reform Committee and *The Miners' Next Step* in 1912.⁹⁸

Perhaps this explains why he never joined the Communist Party of Great Britain on its formation in 1920, for at heart Noah Ablett was a political agitator whose strength came from his pen and from his oratory. It is highly unlikely that he would have ever tolerated the party discipline and thematic schisms which bedevilled the CPGB in the 1920s, most notably around the Class against Class period of the late 1920s.

Ablett's vision was of a democratically elected group of workers intent on controlling their own affairs without recourse to leaders and more importantly controlling their own affairs at the point of production. In this spirit *The Miners' Next Step* could fall back on the bitter legacy left by the events of 1910 and comment that,

To the leaders everything seemed to be in the melting pot, because the men insisted on taking a hand in the conduct of affairs. There was much vain talk on the leaders side about the growing spirit of anarchy which was bringing chaos into the coalfield, and on the men's side, a growing distrust of leadership, and a determination to gain more control.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Ibid p.90.

⁹⁷ *A Minimum Wage for Miners*, op cit, p.33.

⁹⁸ For a good introduction to *The Miners' Next Step* see R Merfyn Jones, Pluto Press, London 1972, p.3-8.

⁹⁹ Ibid p.17.

For a man such as Ablett who believed in individual freedom and liberty for the working class, the descent of the Soviet Union into mass terror and oppression would have confirmed all his initial fears that without democratic control by the rank and file, socialism was destined to fail. In this context, his views while utopian have been vindicated.

In this he echoes Rosa Luxemburg who once famously commented that there can be no socialism without democracy;¹⁰⁰ so were the authors of *The Miners' Next Step* correct in their assertion that,

It becomes necessary to devise means which will enable this new spirit of real democratic control to manifest itself, but which will not only enable the men, but which will encourage, nay compel them to take the supreme control of their own organisation.¹⁰¹

Freedom, liberty and emancipation for the working class, through the medium of education were the bedrock of Noah Ablett's life, but by the end of the First World War, it is clear that Ablett's increasing dependence on alcohol, and in particular whiskey, were beginning to affect his judgement. From around 1917 onwards, there are increasing reports in newspapers such as *The Rhondda Leader*, the *Merthyr Pioneer* and others, of Ablett being booked to speak at an event and not turning up.¹⁰²

How much of this was down to alcohol is impossible to say, but given what is known of Ablett's life at this point, it is fair to assume that alcohol was playing a large part. In the final chapter, his decline is documented as best as possible, given the paucity of sources available.

100 Rosa Luxemburg, reference sourced at IZquotes.com

101 *The Miners' Next Step*, op cit, pp.17-18.

102 See for example *The Merthyr Pioneer* 31 March 1917 and also 4 May 1918 given what we already know of Ablett's excessive drinking by this stage, it is possible that this may be why he failed to turn up on this occasion, but this is no more than speculation. There are other examples where Ablett does not turn up at meetings, but I have been unable to document them. There is a huge amount of information available on the National Library of Wales website, not only about his drinking habits, but also his many speeches and political activities going back to 1905.

CHAPTER 6

Passing the Door to which there is No Key

Noah Ablett's Final Years 1921-1935

Noah Ablett had always been a heavy drinker, a phenomenon not uncommon in the hard living, physically demanding, macho world of the South Wales coalfield where he grew up. The daily pressures of a physically, mentally exhausting and at times life threatening job, combined with an increasingly hostile political climate, meant that many miners, including Ablett, appear to have found solace in alcohol, which was freely available. Others found refuge in education, reading, or gambling, but as E D Lewis in his magisterial history of the Rhondda valleys noted sardonically,

In the second half of the 19 c, the Rhondda contained more temples for the worship of God, and more edifices for the worship of the devil than any other mining area in Britain. On the fortnightly Saturday pay day, and especially at local fairs, where each public house in the locality had a drinking booth, disreputable scenes were common. Women too quarrelled openly under the influence of drink, and incited by their men folk even fought each other using their fists like men.¹⁰³

The irony of a supposedly devout non-conformist temperance influenced society, abusing alcohol to this extent is hard to reconcile with the traditional image of the Rhondda. This passage illustrates that the Rhondda at this time was not a homogenous society but was made up of many different elements, which could exist within the parameters of a very parochial and insular society.

The macho posturing could often lead to disastrous consequences as Ablett himself found out,

My father was a very hard and skilful workman and I was brought up in an atmosphere of great deeds performed at the coal face by members of my family. I am only 5 feet six in height and weigh ten stone, and so I cruelly abused my body to keep up the family tradition of hard and successful work. The man who worked next to me, that is the next working place or stall is it is called in South Wales, had the reputation of being a “slasher”, or a man who could produce more output than those working in neighbouring places. I

¹⁰³ Lewis E D, *The Rhondda Valleys*, Phoenix House, London, 1959, p.223. Lewis notes that in the parish of Ystradyfodwg even as early as 1859 there were no less than 26 public houses, five in the home hamlet, 11 in the Clydach Hamlet and 10 in the Middle Hamlet. The human cost of the vast extraction of carboniferous wealth can be found on p.279 of the book. This list does not include the likes of Senghenydd which falls outside the scope of this book. It is interesting to note that Keir Hardie who became MP for Merthyr was a lifelong temperance advocate, and was teetotal all his life.

was determined that he should not beat me, and the result of this determination was that a piece of coal weighing over four tons fell on my leg causing a compound fracture.¹⁰⁴

The unceasing demands of the class war, which now existed between the coal owners and those producing their vast mineral wealth, were what ultimately drove Ablett to drink. He describes the sense of injustice when he discovered that his father was to face a reduction in wages, believing that it was a punishment for his union activities,

I had never before felt so indignant and I immediately rushed back to the pit, and on my own initiative posted up notices that a meeting at the pit top was to be held, and I was wild with impatience to address the men on my wrongs... When an official of the union told me that the notice to my father had been cancelled, so the meeting did not take place.¹⁰⁵

As he notes, this was a turning point in his life. He now began to study Blatchford and Marx, becoming a convinced socialist, “*Or as I prefer a convinced communist.*”¹⁰⁶

This assertion needs some clarification. For a man who described himself as a convinced communist, it is somewhat of a surprise to learn that he viewed the 1917 Russian Revolution with a degree of trepidation, although he was in support of it, and that he never joined the Communist Party.

There are valid reasons for this. Essentially Noah Ablett at heart was a convinced syndicalist rather than a communist. As he was to put it,

There is the horror of bureaucracy co-mingled with the desire to govern as much as possible the conditions under which one has to live, or to put in the manner of Ibsen to find oneself by expressing one’s individuality.¹⁰⁷

Second, Ablett’s rejection, on paper at least, of the state as a means of achieving socialism was also at odds with the ideas of other parties of the left including the Labour Party, whose commitment to harnessing the resources of the state was enshrined in the famous Clause IV of the party’s constitution drafted by Sidney and Beatrice Webb in 1918. Perhaps this explains why he turned down the chance to stand for the Labour Party in Pembroke in 1919. His explanation gives a

104 *What We Want and Why*, op cit, pp.135-136.

105 Ibid, p.139.

106 Ibid, p.140. Ablett describes how he was victimised by the management and of how he was unable to find work for six months on account of his union activities. He describes the struggle that he and others had to find work only by changing your name or some other deceit, and how this affected those deemed to be agitators.

107 *The Fed*, op cit, p.20.

clue to his lack of faith in parliamentary democracy, but also reveals his increasingly heavy workload,

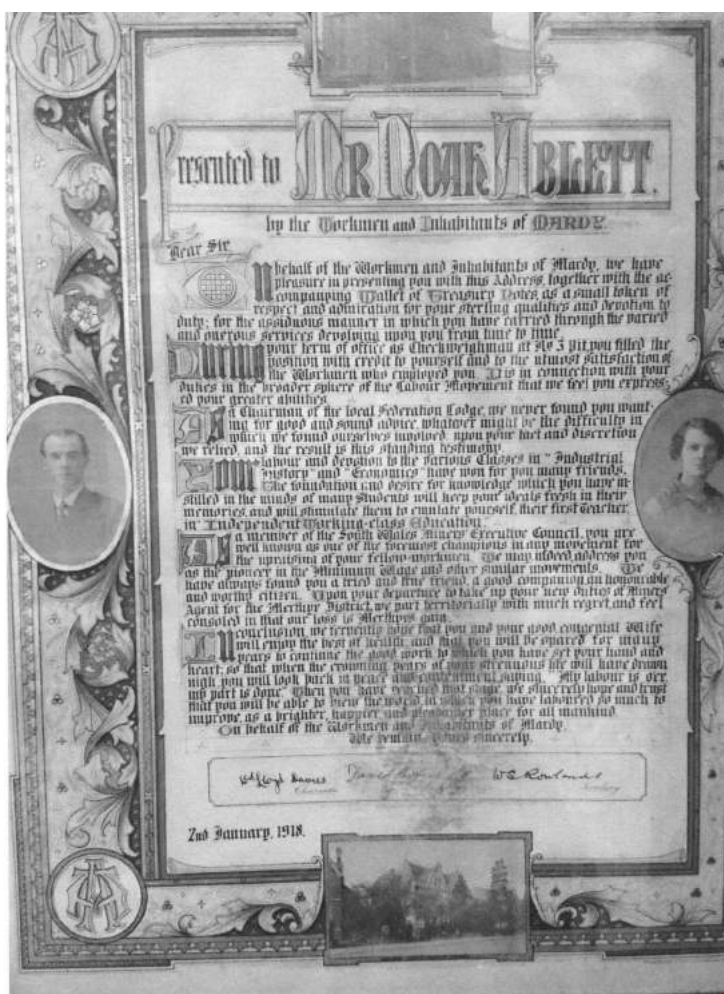
My work as agent for the Merthyr miners, and as an executive member of the South Wales Miners Federation, in addition to my holding the position of chairman of the recently opened Labour College in London is of so pressing a nature as to leave me no time for the essential work of nursing the constituency. It is pretty generally known in South Wales that my belief in the efficacy of the industrial movement of Labour far exceeds my hopes of the rapid success of Labour politics. My opinions may be wrong, but the fact that I hold them militates against my chances of being a successful candidate.¹⁰⁸

With regard to Ablett's increasing dependence on alcohol, it was his partiality for whiskey that contributed to his decline, but it is clear that his problems with alcohol had been known about for many years among his fellow miners who arguably tolerated his drink problem for far too long.

In an interview recorded in the mid-1970s, Dai Dan Evans hints at the effect that alcohol was beginning to have on Ablett's ability to function. Evans for example is convinced that it was Ablett's drinking that led to the closure of the CLC in 1929. He recalls that Ablett and Bill Craik were,

Drinking partners you see, not attending to their duty then.

Ablett was on the committee you see, on the committee, and whenever he went to London, you see, he would spend two or three days up there see with old Craik, and Craik would you know. And then Craik would neglect his duties and that is what I meant by contributing towards the downfall of the



Scroll presented to Noah Ablett on being elected miners agent for Merthyr 1918

108 *The Merthyr Pioneer*, 1 November 1919, p.6.

Central Labour College you see.¹⁰⁹

The difficulties encountered by the CLC were symptomatic of the wider difficulties affecting the labour and trade union movement in the early 1920s. The long hoped for belief that the events of 1917 would usher in a British style Soviet, were giving way to the long dark night of reality, as the capitalist class began to reassert their authority, with the result that Ablett's influence began to diminish as his increasing dependence on alcohol limited his political activity. Nevertheless, it remained the case that Ablett was still held in great reverence by the people of South Wales, as Harold Finch indicates,

In the middle of one of these lectures, the door opened and Noah came in. Mainwaring was there, and he said, I shan't continue any further. Noah has come. Mainwaring gave way at once. He looked up; here was Noah like as if here was the master. Mainwaring shut up at once, sat down. I'll leave it to Noah Ablett. That sort of atmosphere.¹¹⁰

Despite his drink problem, in 1918 having become Miners' Agent at Merthyr, Ablett sought the SWMF nomination for the post of General Secretary of the MFGB. On this occasion he was beaten by Frank Hodges, also an ex-Ruskin student. He again sought the post in 1924, but this time was beaten into third place by Arthur Cook.

Cook's biographer, Paul Davies, suggests that a contributory factor may have been the fact that Ablett had built up a reputation as a heavy drinker,¹¹¹ but perhaps Horner was closer to the truth. Explaining why he had cast his vote for Cook, and discarded his long term friend and mentor, Horner says,

Ablett I said was a thoughtful logical Marxist who did not bother about personal popularity and who would not fail in anything he decided to try. But I went on to say that I thought he would be inclined to try one path and pursue it to the end. Cook on the other hand would examine half a dozen paths and would try the lot. Perhaps four or even five would fail, but the sixth would win. This I said was a time for new ideas. We needed an agitator, a man with a sense of adventure and I believed Cook was the man.¹¹²

Throughout the early 1920s Noah Ablett played a consistently leading role in the politics of the South Wales coalfield at a time of rising tension, both at home

109 Dai Dan Evans interviewed by Hywel Francis and David Smith, 7 August 1973. AUD/264. I am grateful to Jo Waller of the South Wales Miners Library Swansea for clarification on this interview.

110 Harold Finch interviewed by Hywel Francis on 28 August 1973, Ref AUD336, South Wales Miners Library Swansea.

111 Davies P, *A J Cook*, Lives of the Left series, Manchester University Press 1987, p.65. See also Horner A, *Incorrigible Rebel*, Macgibbon and Kee, London, 1960, p.44.

112 Ibid, p.65.

and internationally. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Hands Off Russia campaign in 1920, which had been formed to prevent British troops being sent to Russia to crush the new Soviet government. As one of the leading socialist figures in South Wales, Ablett and other leading Marxists saw the Council of Action as a means of creating their own Soviet on the Russian model.

It is perhaps an indication of the acute mood of the time that Ablett and others believed that the Council of Action could be turned into a revolutionary vanguard, for most of the Councils of Action were firmly in the hands of the conservative trade union and Labour leaders whom Ablett and the URC despised. Nonetheless there were parts of the country where the rank and file mood was more militant. The Home Office Directorate of Intelligence seems to have been particularly interested in Merthyr,

An interesting example of local organisation is provided by Merthyr Borough Council of Action which has been formed for the organisation of industrial workers to function in time of crisis. The prime mover is Noah Ablett (with S O Davies). The Rhondda Council of Action is formed on similar lines and co-operation between the two bodies has been established. A J Cook is prime mover in the Rhondda Council and in conjunction with Davies and Ablett will use the new movement as a preliminary to the establishment of the Soviet system of government.¹¹³

This seems to have been Ablett's fervent hope and in a speech in Swansea, he told a large audience, "That he was confident the Council of Action would eventually become the real government".¹¹⁴

However, by the early months of 1921, the capitalist powers seem to have considered the threat from Russia to be contained and the movement against British intervention in Russia gradually collapsed. By the early months of 1921 domestic matters in the form of the Sankey Commission were taking priority among the activists of South Wales. The background to the Sankey Commission and its fall out would come to define the remainder of Noah Ablett's career.

¹¹³ Davies, op cit, p.41-42. See also CAB 24/110/1793 *Report on Revolutionary Organisations*, 9 September 1920. See also my *Left for the Rising Sun*, where the members of the Triple Alliance are outmanoeuvred by Lloyd George. This quote originally appeared in Aneurin Bevan's *In Place of Fear*. The question is still relevant to anybody contemplating revolutionary change today. What do you do if you cannot satisfy the demands of your own people? Do you resort to violence and repression as happened in Soviet Russia, or do you adopt the constitutional route? This is something that Ablett and the members of the URC never fully grasped.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p.41.

The Sankey Commission, The Triple Alliance and 1926

The end of the First World War in November 1918 had given a short lived boost to the South Wales coalfield and to the SWMF which by February 1921 had a membership of over 200,000. This massive concentration of industrial and economic power contained the seeds of its own demise for, as Ablett's contemporary Frank Hodges, noted somewhat prophetically,

It has been the ambition of the South Wales Miners for many years to impose upon the employers the principle that the conditions of employment of any workmen in or about the mines should be membership of the Miners Federation.... The lesson to be drawn from this is that the coal owners, like other capitalists as a class have no unchangeable principles expect the all-powerful one of profiteering At last the pestilence of non-unionism became unbearable. The government intervened.... The Government even when at war will not permit itself to be used as the propagandist of industrial unionism pure and simple.¹¹⁵

In February 1919 following a ballot of the MFGB for an increase in wages of 30%, the reduction in the working day from 8 hours to 6 and nationalisation of the mines, the government of Lloyd George proposed a Royal Commission headed by Mr Justice Sankey to look into the whole question of the mining industry.

Many of the militants including Ablett and Arthur Cook pressed for strike action, but after lengthy deliberations by the MFGB, Frank Hodges and others managed to persuade the delegates to withhold strike notices for three weeks on the understanding that an interim report be produced, and, more importantly, that the MFGB be allowed to nominate its own members to the Commission. This the government accepted. The MFGB representatives on the Commission were as follows,

Robert Smillie, Herbert Smith, Frank Hodges, Sir Leo Chiozza Money, R H Tawney, Sidney Webb. From the government/employers' side were Arthur Balfour, Sir Thomas Duckham, Sir Thomas Royden, Evan Williams, R W Cooper and J T Forgie. The Sankey Commission began hearing evidence on 3 March 1919 and what quickly emerged was the amount of profiteering that had gone on during the war.

By 20 June four reports had been presented and all four recommended

¹¹⁵ *The Fed*, op cit, p.28. For a comprehensive overview of the mining industry in South Wales at the end of World War One, see CAB /24/62 *The Coal Situation*. September 1918, National Archives, Kew, pp.9-10.

nationalisation of the mining industry. Lord Justice Sankey as Chairman of the Commission went on to recommend that the principle of state ownership of the mines be accepted, so when in October 1919, Lloyd George announced that the government would not accept the Sankey Commission's recommendations, there was a wide-spread feeling of betrayal. With the benefit of hindsight it is clear that the government was simply waiting for the militant mood of the working class fired by the Russian revolution to burn itself out before launching their assault.

Having seen their hopes of a better future for the mining industry dashed, the miners now turned to the trade union movement for support. At the TUC in September 1919, Robert Smillie moved a resolution, backed by Jimmy Thomas and the transport workers, which stated, "*That if the government still refused to accept nationalisation, then a special congress would be called to decide the form of action to be taken to compel the government to carry out the Sankey proposals.*"¹¹⁶

This was the beginning of what became known as the Triple Alliance, which could have formed the basis of an industrial union along the lines of what Ablett and others like Tom Mann had long envisaged. As Mann argued in 1910,

Take the lesson of the Rhondda Valley. You will remember how that unity on the part of the Miners Federation became a fact..... I am not concerned with the riots, but I am concerned with the efficiency of our organisation. We are spending money and energy, aye scores of years declaiming against the capitalistic system, and I am conscious all the time that it is the workers themselves which produce the mischief.¹¹⁷

Instead the actions of Jimmy Thomas and Ernest Bevin ensured that when the miners held their own conference in March 1920 to decide on a general trade union strike, the majority was so small, 525,000 as opposed to 334,000, that it was felt necessary to call a special meeting of the TUC, where the vote was overwhelmingly in favour of political action as opposed to a general strike. Arthur Horner calls this the real moment of betrayal, the point when the Triple Alliance collapsed and the miners were left to fight on alone on what became known in the labour movement as Black Friday 1921.¹¹⁸

From now on the miners and Ablett along with them were on the retreat. The long held beliefs of Ablett, and militants such as Cook and Horner, had been

¹¹⁶ Horner, op cit, p.44.

¹¹⁷ Mann, op cit; 'First Conference On Industrial Syndicalism', 26 November 1910, *The Industrial Syndicalist*, p.17.

¹¹⁸ Horner, op cit, p.45.

betrayed by those who should have stood shoulder to shoulder in the postwar years when anything was possible. Sadly there was to be one last humiliation for Noah Ablett which perhaps even more than Black Friday helped to finally destroy his career and tarnish his reputation.

It was in 1921 that Ablett was finally elected on to the executive committee of the MFGB, a post he was hold until 1926, when having arranged a settlement for Hill's Plymouth Collieries at Merthyr, to prevent the pit being closed, he came under the most sustained and vicious attack despite having the agreement of Tom Richards, general secretary of the Fed. It was felt he had gone behind the backs of his own union and against his own class, but it is not too hard to reach the conclusion that somebody within the SWMF was out to destroy Ablett's career as the following letter point out,

Saturday 13 November 1926

The possibility of the dismantling and abandonment of the Plymouth Collieries having become imminent, we are informed that they can be acquired and carried on by another company if a general 8 hours working day is conceded by the workmen.

Under the circumstances the workmen are asked to record their vote upon the following proposal.

The Proposal:

That if a general district arrangement for the South Wales coalfield is not of such a character as to make the proposal necessary, the workmen are prepared to authorise their representatives to make an equivalent concession to meet the position.

Signed Thomas Richards

Noah Ablett

W M Llewellyn

Isaac Edwards¹¹⁹

In the bitter fall out which followed this dispute, and in the aftermath of the General Strike, when he had been arrested for sedition, Ablett was removed from the executive committee of the SWMF, the MFGB and also the CLC which by this time was in serious financial difficulty. It was felt in later years that Ablett had carried the can for a number of issues within the SWMF, and that ultimately he had been betrayed, for in the end he was too loyal to the union and to his class to betray his fellow workers.

In his response to the maelstrom which now engulfed him, Ablett

¹¹⁹ Francis H, Smith D, *The Fed*, p.237.

acknowledged the gravity of the situation, but also asked for understanding and respect,

This is the ugliest situation I have ever faced. I have sacrificed my reputation and my position as a member of the National Executive, which represents all my ambitions in life, for the sake of Hill's Plymouth and the town of Merthyr.¹²⁰

Dai Dan Evans sums up the feelings of many when he says, "*Ablett gave the impression of a man who had had a raw deal in life. See I believe this. That Ablett carried the can for something in the movement, in this movement that somebody else should have carried.*"¹²¹

There is no doubt that this situation contributed to his decline for having considered that he had sacrificed his career for the people of Merthyr, there was nothing left for him to achieve. The world had moved on and whatever was achievable in the heady pre-revolutionary days of 1912 was not going to work in the changed circumstances of 1926.

Noah Ablett died on Thursday 31 October 1935 after a long battle with cancer, but in reality the battle had been lost long ago. A new generation was coming to the fore whose priorities no longer reflected Ablett's generation and his beliefs. The ideas espoused by Ablett, Mainwaring and others in *The Miners' Next Step* had been tested and found wanting when up against the harsh political realities.

For those such as Horner and Aneurin Bevan, the battles that they had fought would be shaped by the need to defeat fascism, and the effort to create a welfare state out of the ruins of world war, including nationalisation of the mines, a policy that Ablett had always opposed. Looked at from this perspective, Ablett's life could be considered a failure, but I want to insist in conclusion that there remains a great deal to be learned from his life and beliefs.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p.237.

¹²¹ Dai Dan Evans, op cit.

Conclusion

One of the pleasures of being a historian is the joy of coming across the unexpected fragment of information, or undiscovered photograph which can easily lead to new areas of research and perhaps a different conclusion to that which was originally envisaged. So it was with writing this book.

When I first began researching Noah Ablett's life in the mid-1990s I was always puzzled why nobody had ever attempted a study of this most enigmatic of personalities, given that the lives of many of his contemporaries have been extensively researched and documented in various forms over several decades, most notably John Maclean, who has been the subject of a major study by the late James Young, as well as his daughter Nan Milton, and most recently by Dave Sherry. If Noah Ablett was as has been suggested, the greatest prewar Marxist, then where does that leave John Maclean?

Ablett's Welsh contemporaries notably A J Cook, Arthur Horner and Aneurin Bevan have also been well documented, in the case of Bevan by Michael Foot, John Campbell and Nicklaus Thomas Symonds, and in Horner's case by Nina Fishman. Given the extensive research that has been done on these figures and their political struggles, this surely begs the question of why Ablett was neglected for so long, so in light of the above historiography, I offer the following suggestions as a conclusion.

The first factor has to be the lack of personal papers. During the writing of this book it was suggested to me that several people had contemplated writing a biographical study of Noah Ablett, but had been put off by the lack of any meaningful correspondence. This is not just a problem that is confined to Noah Ablett. As I have discovered over the years, many of Ablett's fellow socialists and trade union leaders lived for the moment, and for the cause to which they were committed. The downside of this was that little or nothing was committed to posterity in terms of personal correspondence, and as a result there is a blank canvas where there should have been a masterpiece. This applies to leaders such as Will Lawther as equally as it does Noah Ablett.

Secondly unlike Nye Bevan who rose to become a Cabinet minister and architect of the NHS, Ablett never achieved power or national prominence in the way that Horner or Will Lawther did. Perhaps a better comparison can be drawn

with John Maclean whose stature among socialist activists went beyond his native Glasgow. Noah Ablett was a major figure within the South Wales coalfield, but unlike the political figures cited he was never able to take his place on the national stage.

Will we learn from Noah Ablett's mistakes or will we be doomed to forever be striving to climb the mountain on the path that Ablett laid out for us during his incredibly active and tragic life without ever reaching the summit.

This is the paradox that Ablett wrestled with and it is to be hoped that we can one day realise the vision that Noah Ablett left us through a modern rejuvenated IWCE movement. Details of this organisation can be found at [www.iwceducation.co.uk](http://iwceducation.co.uk). The IWCE network has also published a manifesto entitled *Class Struggle - Adult Education for the 21st Century* which can be obtained from: <http://iwceducation.co.uk/>.

Ultimately Noah Ablett was a tragic figure rather than a heroic one who was brought down by circumstances and personal weakness. Despite these limitations he was and remains a towering intellect, an autodidact of great originality and a visionary leader in a generation of outstanding leaders, someone who could distil a complex historical argument into a weapon of class war within a few sentences. As the *Merthyr Pioneer*, 26 May 1917, reported,

Mr Ablett gave a very strong and educative lecture Nationalities and Internationalism. He traced the history of the nation. He showed how wars were brought about by the capitalist system, and how that system was maintained and strengthened by the people being divided against themselves. He appealed to the workers to study present day questions and to organise strongly on industrial lines to overthrow capitalism and to establish a system of society which would abolish wars and poverty and secure the true emancipation of the working class.¹²²

The insistence of no surrender should serve as a fitting epitaph for Noah Ablett because in the end it is only through the medium of class struggle that the working class will achieve that emancipation which is rightfully theirs.

Ultimately, the vision which Ablett had may have been flawed, but that does not make it any less inspiring, since ultimately power rests with people and their sense of themselves as a collective, and as a social class, not in an institution such as Parliament which, seeing it as no more than the expression of a capitalist class,

¹²² *Merthyr Pioneer*, 26 May 1917, p.4.

Ablett and others dismissed as irrelevant to their lives. It is time for working people to finally take back the power for themselves.

SOUTH WALES ECHO AND EXPRESS, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31,

Death Of Mr. Noah Ablett

Agent to Merthyr
Miners for 17
Years

HIS LIFETIME OF SERVICE

MR. Noah Ablett, for 17 years agent to the Merthyr miners, died at his home in Dyke-street, Merthyr, to-day aged 52. Mr. Ablett, who started his career as a working miner in the Rhondda Valley, won a scholarship at Ruskin College in 1907 and was a student there for a year, during which he helped to form the Plebs League.

When the Labour College was founded by the Plebs League in 1909 he joined the board of governors and conducted an extensive campaign in the South Wales coalfield, which resulted in the miners becoming part owners of the college.

For several years afterwards he acted as chairman of the Labour College Governors.

At the end of 1909 Mr. Ablett, who had meanwhile returned to his old occupation as a miner, was appointed a colliery check-weigher at Mardy, and in 1910 he was elected a member of the South Wales Miners' Federation Executive Council for the Rhondda district.



MR. NOAH ABLETT

He became miners' agent at Merthyr eight years later. He was an executive member of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain from 1919 to 1926.

Mr. Ablett was one of South Wales's leading Labour propagandists. During his Plebs League days he contributed to the "Plebs Magazine" a series of articles which were subsequently published as a text book for the Labour College classes under the title of "Easy Outlines of Economics," and notable among numerous labour publications and pamphlets written wholly or in part by him was "The Miner's Next Step," the first three chapters of which came solely from his pen.

Further Reading

For an introduction to the Rhondda E D Lewis *The Rhondda Valleys*, Phoenix House, London 1959, is essential reading. For a more recent account of the Rhondda *Democratic Rhondda Politics and Society 1885-1951* by Chris Williams, Cardiff University Press, 1996, is very good on the rise and fall of the labour movement in this period.

On individual miners and their leaders, I found *Mabon: A Study in Trade Union Leadership*, University of Wales Press, 1959 by E W Evans very useful. See also Arthur Horner's autobiography *Incorrigible Rebel*, Macgibbon & Kee, London, 1960 and also Nina Fishman, *Arthur Horner A Political Biography 1894-1944*, Lawrence and Wishart 2010. Horner had been one of Ablett's protégés in the years just prior to and preceding the First World War. The title of his autobiography could equally apply to Noah Ablett himself. See also *A J Cook* by Paul Davies, in the Lives of the Left series, Manchester University Press, 1987. It has been suggested that Noah Ablett created a good many socialists within the South Wales coalfield. His influence on men such as Cook and Horner is very evident.

Also very readable is Will John Edward's autobiography, *From the Valley I Came*, Angus and Robertson, 1956. Edwards had been a Ruskin student at the same time as Noah Ablett and became very active within the South Wales Plebs League at one point serving as secretary.

On the politics of the South Wales Coalfield the best starting point is Robin Page Arnot's *The South Wales Miners. Glowyr de Cymru. Years of Struggle 1898-1914*, George Allen and Unwin, 1967, which details the years between the founding of the South Wales Miners Federation and the outbreak of First World War, the years when Ablett's influence reached its zenith.

For the background to the MFGB, Page Arnot's two volumes entitled *The Miners - A History of the Miners Federation of Great Britain 1889-1910* and the subsequent volume which covers the period from 1910 onward entitled *The Miners Years of Struggle 1910 onwards* are essential reading. Also useful is Ness Edward's *History of the South Wales Miners Federation*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1938.

On the general politics of the mining industry, the following books may be of

interest. *Democracy in the Mines* edited by Ken Coates, Spokesman Books, Nottingham, 1974 gives a good description of the various political and industrial currents, which characterised the mining industry from syndicalism to guild socialism, to the controversy surrounding the Sankey Commission. It is interesting to note that of the five contributors to the book, only W F Hay had not been a CLC student at some point.

For a very good series of essays on the national and also regional perspectives of the mining industry a good place to start would be *Miners Unions and Politics 1910-1947*, edited by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and David Howell, Scholar Press, Aldershot 1996. This book covers the well-trodden ground of *The Miners' Next Step*, but also looks further afield and considers such diverse areas as Nottinghamshire and Scotland.

For a comprehensive history of the Fed, see Hywel Francis and David Smith *The Fed - a History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, Lawrence and Wishart 1980. Also of use from the employers perspective is *Labour Strife in the South Wales Coalfield 1910-1911* by David Evans, Educational Publishing Company Cardiff. For a harrowing account of the human cost of mining, John Brown's study of the Senghenydd mining disasters of 1901 and 1913, *Valley of the Shadow*, Alun Books Port Talbot 1981, is essential but an emotional and very poignant read.

For the educational background to the Plebs League, its struggles with the WEA, and the CLC, the best starting point is *Leaders and Teachers. Adult Education and the Challenge of Labour in South Wales 1906-1940* by Richard Lewis. For the NCLC, see JPM Millar, *The Labour College Movement*, NCLC Publishing Society, London, date of publication not stated. For the CLC see *The Central Labour College A Chapter in the History of Adult Working Class Education* by W W Craik, Lawrence and Wishart 1964.

To date the women's perspective on the Plebs League and IWCE movement has been strangely neglected, so I can recommend the life of Mary Bridge's Adams by Jane Martin. The book is called *Making Socialists. Mary Bridge's Adams and the fight for knowledge and power 1855-1939*, Manchester University Press, 2010.

A wonderful book, although very difficult to obtain is *The Tredegar Workmen's Hall 1861-1951* by D J Davies. A much more recent and updated

addition to the history of the South Wales Miners Libraries is *Do Miners Read Dickens. Origins and Progress of the South Wales Miners Libraries 1973-2013* by Hywel Francis and Sian Williams which was published to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the opening of the South Wales Miners Library in Swansea, itself a product of the disintegration of the original lending libraries.

On syndicalism, the best account is still Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900-1914*, Pluto Press 1976. Holton is very good on such groupings as The Syndicalist Education League, a group to which Ablett contributed a considerable amount of time and energy.

Within this framework although very difficult to obtain is *The Industrial Syndicalist, Documents in Socialist History*, Spokesman Books, Nottingham, 1974. The *Industrial Syndicalist* was a newspaper printed between July 1910 and May 1911. It was edited by Tom Mann and this book contains reprints of the newspaper between those dates, including the article by Noah Ablett and W F Hay on a Minimum Wage for Miners. Ablett is also mentioned in the book as a person who is prepared to speak on behalf of syndicalism.

The Socialist History Society

The Socialist History Society was founded in 1992 and includes many leading Socialist and labour historians, academic and amateur researchers, in Britain and overseas. The SHS holds regular events, public meeting controversies. We produce a range of publications, including the journal Socialist History and a regular Newsletter.

The SHS is the successor to the Communist Party History Group, which was established in 1946 and is now totally independent of all political parties and groups. We are engaged in and seek to encourage historical studies from a Marxist and broadly-defined left perspective. We are interested in all aspects of human history from the earliest social formations to the present day and aim for an international approach.

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Contents

Editorial: Before '68

Ben Jones

Blacklisted! A history of rank-and-file class struggles on construction sites

Jack Fawbert

'We imagined ourselves back under the German Occupation' Generational transfer in the Dutch Trotskyist movement during the 'long 1950s'

Bart van der Steen and Ron Blom

'Djilasism' and 'New Leftist' Dissidence in Sixties Yugoslavia

Benjamin Wynes

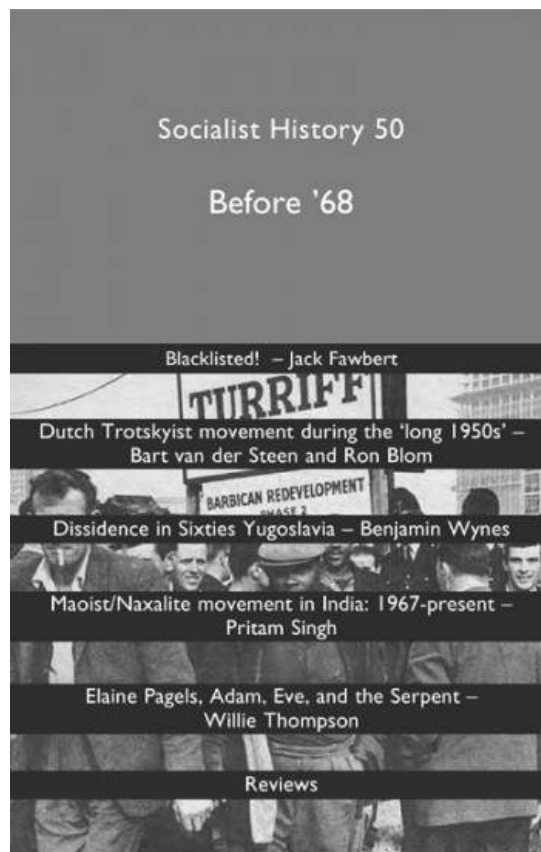
The origins, influence, suppression and resilience of the Maoist / Naxalite movement in India, 1967 – present

Pritam Singh

Book to remember: Elaine Pagels, Adam, Eve, and the Serpent

Willie Thompson

Reviews



Climbing Mount Sinai

Noah Ablett 1883-1935

Noah Ablett has been described as the ultimate organic intellectual. An accomplished autodidact, scholar, polemicist, orator and teacher; he was one of the most outstanding, but controversial labour activists to emerge from the period of unprecedented industrial, political and social turmoil which convulsed the South Wales coalfield in the years preceding the First World War. One of the authors of *The Miners' Next Step*, Ablett's premature death robbed the labour movement of one of its ablest advocates.

About the author

Robert Turnbull is a writer and historian. He is a graduate of Ruskin College, Oxford, and the University of Northumbria. He has written for the TLS and BBC History Magazine. He is married with three sons and lives in the North East of England. Rob has a longstanding interest in the history of the South Wales coalfield, where he lived for many years.

He is also the author of *Left for the Rising Sun, Right for Swan Hunter: The Plebs League in the North East of England 1908-1926*, Five Leaves Publications, 2014.



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